

THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE SECRET OF FIRE MOON

PART I: THE RIDDLE OF THE MASTERS





in

**THE SECRET
OF
FIRE MOON**

Part I: The Riddle of the Masters

An unknown person sends The Three Investigators old letters written by a famous painter. The letters contain information about a mysterious painting known as *Fire Moon*. The irony of it is that nobody has seen this painting before, and many claim that it does not exist. How can one search for a non-existent painting? Yet, there are several people going after it. When an old adversary appears, only then The Three Investigators realize that they are in the middle of a dangerous game.

The Three Investigators
in

The Secret of Fire Moon

Part I: The Riddle of the Masters

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Contents

- 1. Flames in the Night**
- 2. A Warning from Rubbish-George**
- 3. The Rolling Messenger**
- 4. Jaccard's Letters**
- 5. The Corn Flakes Logo**
- 6. Anamorphosis**
- 7. Hernández's Tomb**
- 8. On Miller's Trail**
- 9. The Trail Through the Canyon**
- 10. Child Detectives on the Wrong Track**
- 11. High Noon**
- 12. Brittany's Story**
- 13. Subservience to Authority**
- 14. Purely Business**
- 15. A Great Opportunity**
- 16. Operation Master Thief**
- 17. Back on the Trail**
- 18. The Break Out**

1. Flames in the Night

The night was unusually cool and foggy as Bob Andrews left the auditorium and stepped out onto the street. The few other viewers who had attended the late show at a small cinema in Pacific Palisades had already left during the credits.

Bob looked at his watch. He had to go home urgently. The time limit his parents had given him to return home tonight had already been exceeded by twenty minutes. Bob unlocked his bicycle, swung himself onto the saddle and started cycling.

Because of the heavy fog, he decided to take a small detour through the mountains instead of riding along the coastal road. Cyclists were sometimes simply overlooked there in such weather conditions.

Ten minutes later, Bob reached the outskirts of Rocky Beach. The small Californian coastal town lay dark and quiet before him. No one was on the road any more. A dog barked somewhere in the distance. A black cat, crossing the road from left to right, scurried under a parked car as the light from the bicycle lamp caught it. The rest of the city seemed to be asleep by now.

Bob rode past a petrol station that had been abandoned for years. Next to it was an electrical substation, and directly behind was the old Rocky Beach City Administration building—an ugly, weathered concrete block. It stood empty in the meantime and fortunately it was soon to be demolished, as the city administration had moved to the city hall.

Bob was whistling the movie theme from the credits and looked forward to his warm bed. Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a bright flash of light, followed by a loud explosion that stunned his ears like a bomb. A second later, Bob was hurled from his bicycle as if he was hit by an invisible fist. He landed hard on the asphalt two metres from his bike and a sharp pain twitched through his shoulder. He protected his head with his arms and remained lying there breathless.

Something pelted down on him. He heard the hissing of fire, smelled biting smoke, and a wave of glowing air swept over to him. Bob turned to take a look.

The administration building was ablaze. Black smoke mushrooms poured out of the shattered windows whose panes had rained down on him in tiny splinters. The street lights had gone out. The electrical supply seemed to have gone out as well.

Bob stared at the sea of flames. The flickering was reflected in the spokes of his bicycle, whose tyres were still spinning. The heat was burning his skin. At any second, he expected a second explosion. Still, he couldn't move from the spot. He was paralyzed.

It was only when someone suddenly touched him from behind that Bob awoke from his rigour. He turned around. A man with long, grey and unkempt hair stood behind him. His face was dirty, his teeth were stained, and he smelled bad. He looked at Bob with concern. "Are you all right, Bob Andrews?"

"Rubbish-George!" Bob gasped when he recognized the tramp.

Rubbish-George said something, but Bob had a horrible beeping in his ear and could barely understand him.

"All right," he said quickly. "I'm all right... All is well."

A tremendous crash made him turn around. A piece of the outer wall of the building collapsed like a house of cards, plunged down and cracked open in a cloud of dust. A storey-high piece of concrete tipped over onto the site of the electrical substation and bent a power pole like a toothpick.

Rubbish-George dragged Bob to his feet and took him to a safe distance. Bob's legs went down as he tried to walk alone. He sat back down. And now the first people came. Many were just wearing pyjamas and nightgowns. They stared in horror at the ruined building and the raging flames.

Within minutes, three large fire engines were brought into position and connected to hydrants. The water that the firemen sprayed through the broken windows had little effect against the fire.

While white steam were mixed with the black smoke, the ambulances arrived. Paramedics hurried around looking for injured people. One of them reached Bob. "What's the matter, boy? Are you all right?"

"I... yeah, I... I just fell off my bike. I, uh..." This is as far as he got. The young man took him to the ambulance where he could lie on a stretcher. Someone put a blanket around him, measured his pulse, asked him questions and examined his aching shoulder.

"Just a bruise," they finally said, and Bob got a cup of coffee in his hand. "Your blood circulation's a bit affected. You're in a mild shock. Just sit here. We'll call your parents to come and pick you up."

"What? No. I'm... I'm fine. Thanks." Bob tried to smile and sipped his coffee, which was too strong for him.

The road around the burning building was barely sealed off. The crowd of onlookers was growing. A camera crew showed up. But Bob only had eyes for the flames that blazed unchecked into the sky before they got lost in the black smoke.

It was a strange feeling when Pete Crenshaw lost the ground under his feet—as if some divine force had turned off the force of gravity. Suddenly he floated up into the sky, further and further up. Below him, the ocean glittered and the coastline spread out before him as a gigantic panorama. The higher he rose, the quieter it became. The clatter of the motorboat below him slowly sank in the soft murmur of the wind. It was heavenly calm. Pete suddenly felt as if he were the only person in the world. He wanted to float on forever.

The title song of *Mission: Impossible* abruptly tore him out of his dreams. It was his mobile phone. Damn! Why did he even have it on him?

Who had to call him while he was flying along the California coast? Actually, there was only one person who could have done that. Pete thought for a moment whether he should just let it ring. But finally his curiosity won out.

Jupiter did not bother with greetings. "Pete! Where are you?"

"If you want to know for sure—you just disturbed my meditation in weightlessness. I'm hanging under a brand-new paraglider right now and letting Jeffrey's motorboat pull me up into the airy heights. It's great, you should definitely—"

"Great, Pete! But get back down to earth as soon as possible! Something's happened! Meet me at Headquarters!"

The whole way back from the beach to The Jones Salvage Yard, Pete swayed between anger and worry. The trip to lofty heights had come to an abrupt end. But Jupiter would not have insisted on it if it wasn't really important. Pete shifted up a gear.

Strictly speaking, the salvage yard was hardly more than a scrap yard, even if its owner, Jupiter's uncle Titus, did not like to hear that. He had long abandoned the scrap trade and specialized in salvaged and used items of all kinds. But despite his wife Mathilda's pronounced love of order, the two of them had never really succeeded in taming the chaos that scattered throughout the yard.

Pete raced on his mountain bike through the open wrought-iron gate onto the yard and almost collided with the postman. Pete grabbed the brakes in time and came to a halt half a metre in front of the man, stirring up dust from the ground.

"Hey, take it easy, young man!" the postman cried laughing.

"Sorry, but I really am in a hurry," Pete apologized.

"Here." The postman handed him an envelope. "Mail for The Three Investigators. That's you, isn't it?"

Pete nodded. "Thank you. Have a nice day." He steered towards the dilapidated, sun-bleached mobile home trailer that was parked in the back corner, right next to the open-air workshop. The trailer fitted in so well with the clutter of the salvage yard that at first glance, nobody would have bothered about it at all—except for Jupiter, Pete and Bob, because in reality, the trailer was the headquarters of The Three Investigators.

The outer appearance was deceptive, but the inside was equipped with modern equipment. Over the years, The Three Investigators had not only collected a computer and a telephone, but also various technical gadgets and a fully equipped crime and photo laboratory... and a TV—which was turned unusually loud when Pete entered the trailer. Jupiter sat in front of it, his face just an arm's length from the screen. The First Investigator didn't even turn to Pete, but just pointed silently to the current news broadcast.

The news report showed footages of a burning house at night. Pete immediately recognized the old City Administration building on the outskirts of Rocky Beach. Dumb with fright, he listened to the report.

"And this is what it looked like at 12:20 am. Inside the building, there was an explosion that caused part of the exterior wall to collapse. A neighbouring electrical substation was badly damaged, causing a power outage in Rocky Beach for an hour. Fortunately, the nearby petrol station is no longer in operation, otherwise the fire could have caused an even greater disaster.

"As if by a miracle, only one person was slightly injured by the explosion. It was a passing cyclist. Since the administration building has been empty for several weeks and was scheduled for demolition in the near future, the material damage is manageable. However, the road will remain closed for an indefinite period of time until it is ensured that no other parts of the building would collapse. Now reporting live from the site, Sharon Lockwood."

The TV picture switched and they could see the burnt building during the day. The flames were extinguished, but the façade shone black from the wet soot. The camera panned in on Sharon Lockwood, the reporter from the regional station. She was perfectly styled as always and looked at the camera with a serious expression.

"This morning, this picture of destruction came to the shocked Rocky Beach residents. As the fire was only extinguished a few hours ago, the cause of the explosion is still unknown. Inspector Cotta of the Rocky Beach Police Department did not rule out a faulty gas line or arson. The city's power supply was restored during the night. How long the clean-up operation will take is still to be seen. However, the mayor of Rocky Beach assured that the city's 200th anniversary celebration, whose preparations are already in full swing, will take place as planned."

“Unbelievable,” said Pete, when he could finally tear himself away from the TV. “An explosion here in Rocky Beach! I must have slept like a baby, or else I would have woken up. My goodness, what could have happened!”

“Something has happened,” replied Jupiter. “That is why I called you here. Bob called me earlier.”

Pete swallowed. “And?”

“And Bob was in the middle of it again,” came a voice from the door.

Jupiter and Pete turned around. Bob Andrews stood in the doorway.

“Bob!” cried Pete in horror. “You look terrible!”

“Thank you, Pete. These are encouraging words from a true friend.”

“But what happened?” Pete asked.

“Is it so hard to guess? I was the cyclist who was slightly injured.” Bob pointed to the TV screen and, exhausted, he fell into an armchair.

He was immediately mobbed with questions from Pete and Jupiter. Bob had already told the whole story several times to the police, who had taken his testimony last night; and to his parents, who had almost died of worry.

He had little sleep. But Bob bowed to his fate and told his friends what had happened. Jupiter and Pete listened intently.

“That’s it,” Bob concluded his report. “And I can tell you—I would have gladly foregone the experience of being in the immediate vicinity of an exploding building. You shouldn’t try to copy me on this. Although I can already see that you, Juve, would have loved to swap places with me, wouldn’t you?”

“You said it! But I wonder if it wouldn’t have been possible to find out something about the cause of the explosion by observing the event closely.”

Bob shook his head. “It wasn’t an event, Juve, it was a catastrophe! And believe me, no one in the world could have observed anything in this situation. It all happened so quickly. By the time I realized what had happened, Rubbish-George was standing beside me.”

“Rubbish-George?” Pete asked in surprise.

“Yes.” Bob frowned. “He showed up suddenly and helped me. But... strange. I’d forgotten all about it. It only just came back to me now. I must have been in such a shock...”

“Did you tell Inspector Cotta that Rubbish-George was also at the scene?” Juve asked.

“I just told you, it just came back to me this second.”

Jupiter pinched his lower lip. “So there’s another witness the police know nothing about. It’s possible that Rubbish-George may have had a closer look at the incident.”

“But what could he have observed?” Pete asked. “It was probably a faulty gas line. These things happen. And since the building is to be torn down, it’s possible that something was already broken.”

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. “Possible. In any case, I’m glad you’re safe, Bob.”

Bob nodded gratefully and took the opportunity to change the subject. “What is that letter in your hand anyway, Pete? Is that for us?”

“The letter?” Pete looked at the envelope as if he was seeing it for the first time. “I’d forgotten all about it. The postman had just gave it to me.” He turned the plain white envelope between his fingers.

“It’s funny. No return address.” He looked at the postmark. “But it was sent close by.”

“Open it,” Bob demanded.

Pete nodded and opened it. A double-folded sheet of paper appeared, on which was printed three lines. Pete read them—and frowned.

He turned the slip of paper over. The back was empty. He read the lines one more time. Then he shook his head.

Jupiter became impatient. "Come on, Pete! What does it say?"

"Sheesh!" Pete went. "Something that's supposed to be funny."

"Could you be more specific?" Jupe probed.

Pete handed Jupe the letter. It said:

Last night's power outage was no accident.

It's about Jaccard's legacy.

Santa Monica Pier, 4:00 pm today.

2. A Warning from Rubbish-George

“Will you please let me be part of your speechlessness?” Bob asked after Jupiter had stared silently at the letter for a while. Finally, Bob simply snatched the letter from the First Investigator’s hand and read it himself.

“Power outage?” Bob asked, uncomprehendingly. “What power outage?”

“The one caused by the explosion last night,” replied Jupiter.

“I don’t understand. The power outage was caused by the explosion in the next building. Or... wait a minute... are you saying that the explosion wasn’t accidental?”

“Not a coincidence—and therefore not an accident,” confirmed Jupiter. “But on purpose.”

“No coincidence, no accident, and above all, no sender,” Pete said. “Somebody’s pulling our leg!”

“You think so?” Bob said.

“Of course,” Pete replied. “At the moment, no one knows what caused the explosion yet—not even the police. You’ve got to be kidding me.”

The First Investigator shook his head decidedly. “This letter is no joke. It can’t be a joke. I’m afraid you’re missing a crucial detail, Pete.”

“And what is that?”

Jupiter grimaced. “You’ll figure it out for yourself, I bet.”

Pete rolled his eyes. “Just tell me, Juve!”

“How did this letter come to us?”

“I just told you. By mail. The postman gave it to me just now.”

“Exactly. And what does that say about the exact chronology of events?”

The Second Investigator shook his head reluctantly. He did not know what Jupiter meant by his question.

“Of course, Juve!” cried Bob suddenly. “It means that it was posted yesterday! Before the explosion.”

“Before the explosion? But that... that means...” Pete said.

“That means that the sender of this letter knew at least a few hours in advance that there would be a power outage. The postmark is from yesterday. So there’s no doubt,” Jupiter said. “This letter is no joke, fellas, but rather an anonymous tip-off. The crucial question is, who sent it to us? And why?”

“We should find out more about this,” Bob surmised. “The letter is almost like an assignment.”

“Correct, Bob,” Jupiter said, rubbing his hands. “But whoever is behind this, we shouldn’t go to the meeting place unprepared.”

For a second, Pete thought he had misunderstood Jupiter. “Wait a minute. Does that mean you want to go there?”

“We,” Jupiter corrected him. “We’ll have to go to Santa Monica Pier this afternoon to get it.”

“We?” Pete objected. “Why? Just because some stranger sent us a letter?”

“Pete, this stranger knows something. It’s obvious! And the meeting place is the only lead we have to follow up on in this case.”

“Case? What kind of case?” Pete asked.

“I would describe the explosion of the administration building as a case,” Juve said.

“But not for us! Even though Bob happened to witness the explosion, it doesn’t make it a case for The Three Investigators! This is a matter for the police, Juve!”

“The sender of this letter seems to think differently. I don’t think that Bob’s presence there makes the matter our case. But this letter does.”

Pete drew in his breath to contradict the First Investigator, but he could think of anything to say.

“Listen, Pete,” Jupiter continued in a conciliatory tone. “The thing is completely harmless.”

“The explosion of a building is not harmless!” Pete yelled.

“There’s no mention of the explosion in the letter. It’s about a power outage.”

“Yeah, but…” Pete didn’t know what to say anymore. “What now? Explosion or power outage? I don’t understand it at all.”

Jupiter nodded. “And that’s exactly why we’re gonna go to Santa Monica Pier and see who this stranger is and what he has to say. Of course, if it’s dangerous in any way, we’ll get out immediately.” Jupiter looked at the clock. “We still have a few hours before we have to leave. We should make the most of it.”

“What are you up to, Juve?” Bob asked.

“We’ll have to do some background checks. I’ll call Inspector Cotta. Maybe there are already results from the forensic investigation that the press doesn’t know about. And then we have this message itself.” The First Investigator tapped into the letter. “Jaccard. That name is the only concrete clue. There should be enough time to find out more about this man—if he is who I think he is.”

“Well,” Bob hesitantly began. “Everyone knows a little about him—Jean-Marie Jaccard, world-famous French painter, died about 20 years ago. Some of his works are so famous that everyone has seen them, for example the *Lily Field* or the *Lady with a Hat*. At auctions, his paintings achieve top prices. I have read that three or four of the ten most expensive paintings in the world are by Jaccard.”

“Six,” Jupiter said. “It’s not less than six.”

“The question is, is this really about Jaccard the painter?” Pete asked.

“You got that right, Pete. Nevertheless, we should find out more about the Jaccard we know, since that’s the only lead we have now. That will be your job, Bob.”

“Let me guess,” Pete said. “You already have a job for me too, right?”

“That’s right, Pete. You will track down Rubbish-George and question him about the events of the previous night. Let’s get to work, fellas.”

There were actually only two places where Rubbish-George, the vagrant known throughout Rocky Beach, was staying—either he was in his wooden shed he had built in a backyard in a less attractive part of town; or he was sitting around at the boardwalk, letting the sun shine on his weather-beaten face and waiting for strollers to throw a few cents into the plastic cup that was always with him.

Despite the lack of sun, Pete was lucky on the beach. Rubbish-George had made himself comfortable on a bench and was just biting into a sandwich when the Second Investigator noticed him. He walked towards the bearded man.

“Good morning, Rubbish-George!”

“Ah, look! A detective! Is that a good or a bad sign?” Rubbish-George smiled.

“Detectives in the morning bring sorrow and worry, that’s what it is, isn’t it?”

“Detectives in the morning banish sorrow and worry!” Pete contradicted and sat down next to the man. “Say, George, there’s something I’d like to talk to you about... about last night.”

“That was quite a bang, huh? Don’t look so bewildered! I’m talking about the explosion! You know, right?”

“Uh, yeah, right! My friend Bob was right there when it happened. And he said you were there too.”

“Hmm,” Rubbish-George muttered approvingly and bit his sandwich. “Perhaps...”

“Huh?”

Rubbish-George chewed on his sandwich again. “It’s possible.”

“I wanted to ask you if you might have seen something.”

“Go ahead.”

“Huh?”

“Well, you said you wanted to ask, so ask!”

“So, uh, did you see anything last night related to the explosion?”

“Hmm... yes.”

“What?”

Instead of answering, Rubbish-George bit his sandwich once more. As he chewed, he apparently absent-mindedly reached for his plastic cup and let a few coins rattle in it.

Pete understood. He hadn’t expected to get the information from Rubbish-George for free anyway. Sighing, he took out his wallet, took out fifty cents and threw it into the plastic cup.

Like a jukebox into which money was thrown, George went on: “I was busy checking the garbage cans in the area for anything useful when Bob Andrews passed me on his bicycle. And then suddenly it went bang and Bob was thrown from the bike. I rushed to help him and then I got him out of there.” Rubbish-George returned to his sandwich.

“But George, I already know that!” Pete complained.

The cunning eyes of the vagrant flashed. “Did you think you’d get valuable information for a measly fifty cents?”

“Is there any information of greater value?”

Rubbish-George nodded. “Oh yes, there is. For detectives like you, there certainly is.”

“Information the police would also be interested in?”

“I’m sure they would.”

“But you didn’t tell the police?” Pete suspected.

“They didn’t ask me.”

“All right. How much is your information worth?”

“Ten dollars.”

Pete laughed in disbelief. “Pardon? Ten dollars? You gotta be kidding me.”

Rubbish-George shrugged his shoulders and put the rest of the sandwich in his mouth. “Suit yourself.”

Pete gritted his teeth. “Five dollars.”

“Okay.” Rubbish-George held out the cup to him and Pete reluctantly threw in a five-dollar note.

“So, there was someone else. Just before Bob came along on his bicycle, someone got into a car right outside the administration building and drove away.”

In a moment, Pete had forgotten about the loss of the money. “Really?” he asked excitedly. “Could you make out what kind of person it was? A man or a woman? Where did the person come from? What kind of car was it? And where did the car go?”

Rubbish-George grinned and held the plastic cup out to Pete again. “For the other half of the money, you get the other half of the information.”

“No,” Pete said firmly. “You’ll get no more money from me.”

“All right.” George turned away and looked out to the sea, lost in thought. He pretended that Pete was no longer sitting next to him.

The Second Investigator wrestled with himself. On one hand, he believed Rubbish-George. He was as sly as he was honest. But another five dollars would tear a rather large hole in Pete’s wallet. “I don’t have that much left,” he made a lame attempt.

“How unfortunate” was Rubbish-George’s laconic response.

For a while, they both stared silently at the sea. Rubbish-George made no move to tell him anything. Finally Pete pulled out his wallet once more, grudgingly checked his cash and collected the last dollars.

“Here,” he said annoyingly and let a handful of change go into the cup. “That’s four dollars and eighty-five cents. That’s really all I have.”

“All right, I’ll take that for once,” Rubbish-George said and quickly tipped the contents of the cup into his jacket pocket, probably to avoid giving the passers-by the impression that he didn’t need any more donations for the day.

“It was a man. Tall, sturdily built, dressed in a black coat. He came from the direction of the administration building. Whether he was really inside, I don’t know. He got into a black 1958 Corvette, a hell of a car, and drove off towards the coast. That’s all I saw.”

Pete nodded. That was actually more than he had expected and definitely worth nine dollars eighty-five cents. “Anything else?”

“Yes,” said Rubbish-George, and the amused expression had completely disappeared from his face. “The last piece of information is provided free of charge, in order to maintain our good business relations... There aren’t many people in this area driving a high-sheen ’58 Corvette. I know that car. It belongs to a man known in certain circles as Night Shadow. Of course, I could be wrong. But if it really was Night Shadow, you detectives better stay away from him.”

Pete swallowed. “And why exactly? Who is this guy?”

“Someone who does other people’s dirty work for them if they pay him enough. He’s ruthless. You don’t mess with people like that, Pete Crenshaw. So watch your back!”

Rubbish-George smiled. “It would be unfortunate if one of my most profitable sources of funding were to dry up.”

3. The Rolling Messenger

In the afternoon, a strong wind had come up, bringing cold air from the Pacific Ocean and making The Three Investigators shiver.

“Brrr!” Bob stammered when they reached Santa Monica Pier and locked up their bikes. “I can’t remember ever being this cold. All that’s missing is the snow! And this in California? Don’t make me laugh!”

“It is definitely still too warm for snow, even though it is not ruled out in principle,” said Jupiter. “We have late autumn, and this year on top of that, we are struggling with the effects of the El Niño climate anomaly. Be glad that we don’t live even further south. Severe storms have been raging there for several weeks now.”

“Well, anything can happen,” Bob said.

“I wouldn’t mind snow,” Pete said. “Snowboarding would complement my fitness programme perfectly!”

Despite the bad weather, Santa Monica Pier was full of people. There was even a short queue at the Ferris wheel, which was located on the small amusement park at the beginning of the pier. Music, children’s screams and the rattle of the little roller coaster came over to The Three Investigators as they entered the park.

The Three Investigators passed an ice cream van. “They should sell mulled wine instead of ice cream,” Pete remarked and headed for an empty bench at the beginning of the pier. Bob and Jupiter sat down as well and together they watched the people passing by.

Jupiter looked at his watch. “We have plenty of time to discuss our findings so far. I spoke to Inspector Cotta on the phone. He wasn’t too pleased that I was interested in the explosion. He thought we were involved in something again, but I was able to make him understand that Bob has a vested interest in the matter. He finally understood that.”

“So?” Bob asked.

“As was to be expected, forensics has not got very far yet. But at least one result is already available—the explosion was not an accident. In fact, the officers found traces of a bomb.”

Pete swallowed audibly. “A bomb? You mean it was an attack?”

“It looks like that. It’s not yet clear who planted the bomb or why,” Jupiter continued. “And it will be some time before they know more, if they can learn anything more from it... Cotta said the perpetrator covered his tracks well.”

“Well,” Pete murmured uneasily. “Not quite as well as the police think. I’ve spoken to Rubbish-George. He saw a man just before the bomb went off. He thinks it is a man known as Night Shadow.”

“Night Shadow?” Bob repeated with a frown.

Pete reported in detail what he had learned from Rubbish-George. “In the end, he warned me. He said we shouldn’t get involved.”

“Well, just relax,” Jupiter said. “We’re just meeting with an informant. It’s completely harmless.”

“But if it is indeed this Night Shadow who is responsible for the explosion... then perhaps the letter is from him!” Pete exclaimed. “Maybe he saw Bob at the explosion and

now he wants to get rid of his only witness.”

“Pete,” Jupiter said calmly. “The worries you have about your friends are touching, but unnecessary. The sender sent the letter before the explosion, remember? So at that time he did not even know that there would be a witness. Also, Bob didn’t see a black Corvette, so it’s unlikely he was noticed the other way around by the driver of the car.”

Bob threw a grateful glance at the First Investigator. Jupiter’s objection was logical and convincing as always.

“Nonetheless, this is valuable information to keep track of. What has come out of your research, Bob?” Jupiter asked.

“Not much. I’ve been reading up on Jaccard, his work and his life. Well, what can I say? He was a famous painter, and he painted hundreds of paintings that hang in museums all over the world. His talent was evident from a very young age. He received coveted scholarships to art schools and so on.

“At seventeen, he had his first exhibition, and from then on things went uphill. He married Nandita Rai, who was half-Indian and who became his manager. They had a son. Jean-Marie Jaccard died after a serious illness at the age of sixty-eight. His wife, Nandita, has now died as well. What the son is doing today, I have not been able to find out.

“If you want to know more, I have some books about Jaccard from the library at Headquarters. I was also able to find an address, which we can certainly find out more about if we need to. It is the Jaccard Society, which deals with the life and work of the painter, organizes exhibitions and so on. But I haven’t called them yet. It might be interesting to note that one of Jaccard’s closest friends is Raúl Hernández—another painter. He was Mexican, but later settled in California, more precisely in Oxnard. Jaccard therefore visited California before. His friend Hernández, however, has died over ten years ago.”

“And what did you find on the subject of Jaccard’s legacy?”

“Nothing, really. Jaccard already earned a huge amount of money with his paintings during his lifetime. He spent most of it when he was alive and left the rest with his wife he died. There’s nothing unusual, if that’s what you mean.”

“Hmm.” Jupiter sounded disappointed. “All right, let’s wait and see what the mysterious sender has to tell us.”

Pete scratched his head. “Above all, let him tell us what a legacy has to do with an explosion... or a power outage... or whatever. That’s the biggest mystery of all, if you ask me.”

Jupiter glanced at his watch, then looked around the pier. “I wonder if he’s here yet.”

“Possibly,” Bob said. “Unfortunately, we don’t know who to look out for. The pier is not exactly small. And there’s far too many people around.”

“Don’t worry,” replied Jupiter. “The sender of the letter obviously knows exactly who he is dealing with. He will get in touch with us, I’m sure of it. But let us keep our eyes open anyway, fellas! It can’t hurt!”

Jupiter stood up and The Three Investigators strolled down the pier to the water. They watched their surroundings very closely. There was a man in the white linen suit in front. He had been leaning against a street lamp for two minutes, shivering. Was he waiting for someone? Or the young woman selling hot dogs—wasn’t she constantly looking over at them?

Jupiter, Pete and Bob had their eyes everywhere. They walked down to the water, looked out over the leaden grey sea and walked slowly along the wooden parapet and back again.

“It’s a little after four,” Bob remarked. “Maybe we did something wrong after all. Maybe we should have behaved more conspicuously. Maybe—”

Someone tapped him on the shoulder from behind. Bob turned around. In front of him was a boy on roller blades. He was about his age, wearing a baseball cap with shaggy blond hair poking out from under it. His mirrored sunglasses were so big that they hid half his face. Wordlessly, he held out a thin and brown envelope to Bob.

“Yes?” Bob asked, surprised.

“I’m supposed to give you this,” the boy said gruffly.

Jupiter pushed himself forward. “By whom?”

“Doesn’t matter. Just take it!”

“Wait a minute! Who are you? Who hired you? And what is this, anyway?” Juve continued probing.

The boy looked around impatiently. “Listen, Buster. I don’t know nothing, okay? I get ten bucks for putting this in your hand. I don’t care about what it is. Now take it!”

Jupiter folded his arms across his chest. “Not until you tell us who sent you.”

The boy shrugged his shoulders. “All right.” He dropped the envelope, turned around and rolled away. The Three Investigators were far too shook up to stop him.

Shortly before he disappeared into the crowd, he turned again and shouted: “Oh, yes, you only have fifteen minutes!”

“I don’t believe it!” Pete exclaimed in amazement. “What was that all about?”

“That means our informant wants to remain incognito for a while longer,” Jupiter answered grimly and bent down to pick up the envelope. “Too bad that I didn’t think of this contingency and took appropriate precautions.”

“Nobody’s infallible, Juve,” Bob comforted him. “So what’s in the envelope? Remember, we only have fifteen minutes—whatever that guy meant.”

Jupiter nodded and opened the envelope. Inside, he found three smaller and slightly yellowed envelopes, torn open at the top. On all three were some writings in faded ink.

“Raúl Hernández, 12 Sunset Cliffs Boulevard, Oxnard, California,” Jupiter read the address aloud on the first envelope. Then he turned the envelope over and held it closer to his nose so that he could also decipher the barely legible return address in the upper left-hand corner.

“It’s from Jaccard,” he said and looked at his friends in surprise. “Here we go...”

4. Jaccard's Letters

29 June

Dear Raúl,

It's hard to imagine, but just sitting at the table, holding the pen and concentrating on the words I want to write is costing me a lot of energy today. From days like these, I'm convinced that I don't even have a week left. But one week is not enough, Raúl!

I need more time to paint Fire Moon. At the moment, I'm hardly making any progress. The size of the canvas alone scares me. And nothing works right away. I only hope that I will be able to finish the painting before my life ends.

You know how much this painting means to me. It's perhaps the most important thing I've ever painted.

I'm too tired to write any more.

Greetings,
Jean-Marie

Jupiter looked up from the letter and saw Bob and Pete sitting next to him on the bench reading along.

"A letter from Jean-Marie Jaccard to his old friend Raúl Hernández, apparently written shortly before his death," said the First Investigator. "But how did this get to the skater boy?" Jupiter folded the letter and inserted it carefully back into the envelope. Then he took out the second letter.

7 July

My friend Raúl!

I'm making progress! I've been better the last few days—much, much better than the weeks before. Maybe I can even travel soon. But most of all, I'm making great progress with Fire Moon.

Suddenly the work is getting easier than ever. It almost worries me. Even in my best phases of life, I did not work so well and with so much energy. Maybe I should have listened to you and painted Fire Moon much earlier. Or is this the last surge of my creativity, because deep inside I know that I can go at any time.

The doctor advised me to rest during his last visit. But you know me. Rest? As if that is what I need in my life! No, if I'm going to die soon, I don't need to rest at all, dear Raúl.

I've been thinking about how to handle Fire Moon. I've always believed that the truth should come out when I die. But now I see things differently.

I've been thinking a lot about my life these past few weeks—the important things and the unimportant things; what stays in the end and what doesn't. I've made mistakes in my life. I regret very much that I could never build a real father-son relationship with Ignace

and that my son left me so early. Compared to this, all the successes in art that I had been chasing for decades have become completely unimportant. Day by day, fame and honour interest me less and less. So I have made a decision. We won't tell anyone. Absolutely no one.

Anyway, I won't be around to see how the art world receives Fire Moon. But I don't care anymore. Fire Moon is to remain a secret—our secret.

In fact, it would give me great pleasure if Fire Moon will never be seen by anyone. What do you think?

*Smiling optimistically towards the end,
Jean-Marie*

“Puzzles and secrets,” mumbled Jupiter after he had finished reading. “Fellas, it seems to me that we have really stumbled onto something here.” He raised his head and looked around the pier.

While engrossed in reading, he had completely ignored his surroundings. But now he remembered that their informant was perhaps watching them at that moment. The man in the white linen suit was still standing by the street lamp. He didn't look over at them, but that didn't mean anything.

“Pete, Bob,” he whispered softly. “I will read you the third letter quietly. You both pretend to read it with me. But I want you to look at the people very carefully. Maybe someone is watching us.”

“Okay,” Pete replied and immediately began to check out the people on the pier. Meanwhile Jupiter took out the third letter.

3 August

My friend Raúl,

This should be my last letter to you. It is a bitter realization, but there is no doubt that I won't make it. I haven't got up for a week, and today is the first day I feel strong enough to write to you. It's strange to know that I am writing my last letter to my best friend and yet I still don't have enough strength to polish every sentence, every word, every syllable as I would like to.

We won't be able to see each other again. For me, it is the most painful part of life. But that's the way it is.

I don't want to argue with the ending that has been planned. Fire Moon is completed. And it's great. Your idea of leaving clues on the tombs is good. Then I will be able to leave my life smiling, knowing that only the smartest will ever unravel the secret and get a glimpse of the truth. In any case, Otto is on his way to you. Let fate takes its course.

Raúl, my dear friend, my time has come. You know you're the best friend I could ever have. I've told you often enough. So I'll spare myself the fancy words and leave with a simple thank you. Thank you for being my friend.

I wish you all the best for your hopefully long and full life. See you on the other side. That's a promise.

*Yours,
Jean-Marie*

For a few seconds, none of The Three Investigators spoke a word.

“It’s really sad,” Bob finally said. “It’s strange. Jaccard is so famous that he was always just a name to me, never a person. But in this letter, he seems to have been very close to this Raúl.”

Jupiter nodded. “However, before we consider the contents of the letters further, have you noticed anything? Has anyone been watching us?”

“I haven’t noticed anything,” whispered Pete.

“Me neither,” Bob said. “That guy in the light suit over there looks kind of weird. But he never once looked over at us.”

“And the messenger who brought the letters?”

“No sign of him,” Bob replied.

“Well, then—”

It happened so fast that none of The Three Investigators could react. As if from nowhere, a hand reached over the back of the bench from behind and snatched the letters!

The First Investigator whirled around. The boy with the roller blades came back, grabbed the letters and skated off at increasing speed.

Pete jumped off the bench and took off in pursuit. The thief shot his blades through the crowd as if it wasn’t even there. Some people cried out in horror as he scraped past them by a hair’s breadth, but this did not cause him to slow down.

Pete saw after only a few seconds that he had no chance. The thief was simply too fast. But then that chap suddenly rammed into a pedestrian and began to stagger. For a moment, he rowed with his arms and tried to regain his balance, but a garbage can got in his way. The boy fell.

And Pete sprinted off. He chased past toddlers and pensioners, jumped over a dog on a leash and squeezed between two prams.

The thief pulled himself up. He hastily looked around. He saw that Pete was approaching, so he set himself in motion again. But then the Second Investigator caught up with him. He got hold of the boy by the sleeve of his T-shirt. A tattoo on his upper arm flashed. Pete pulled. But instead of bringing the thief down, Pete only managed to turn him on his roller blades. He did a pirouette, tore loose and skated on.

Twenty metres on, Pete’s hand was only centimetres from the boy’s shoulder, but then the boy finally picked up speed and the gap grew wider and wider. At the end of the pier, where the crowd dispersed, Pete had no chance. The thief was now so fast that he could easily take on the traffic on the street.

Pete slowed down, and finally stopped. Breathing heavily, he saw the boy disappear around the next street corner.

5. The Corn Flakes Logo

“Are you all right, Pete?” Bob asked anxiously as he and Jupiter finally caught up with the Second Investigator.

“Yes,” Pete said, still panting. “I almost had him. Almost...”

Jupiter stared darkly into the distance to where the thief had turned the corner. “Why?” he murmured. “Why does someone pass us the letters, only to take them away again fifteen minutes later? It doesn’t make sense!”

“It was for us to just read them, that’s for sure,” Bob said.

“And for what purpose?” Pete asked.

“So that we may become aware of something, perhaps...” Bob attempted to explain. “So we know what’s going on with Jaccard and his legacy.”

Pete sighed heavily. “Well, I don’t know about you, but I still have no idea what this is all about. First the explosion, now these letters—what’s the connection?”

“I confess I don’t know,” Jupiter said. “But there must be one. We will get to the bottom of this. In any case, we should try to reconstruct the letters from memory as quickly as possible before we forget. The short-term memory only stores information for about twenty minutes, after which it will be difficult to remember the details. Bob, have you got something to write on?”

“Always!” Bob said, pulling out his notebook. The three sat down on a nearby staircase and wrote down everything they remembered from the letters.

“All right,” Jupiter said and sighed. “That’s a start. And now to the thief himself—without his huge glasses and with different clothes, I probably wouldn’t even recognize him if he passed us at this moment. But it would still be good if we had a clue as to who he is. Pete, you were the closest to him. Did you notice anything?”

The Second Investigator pondered for a moment. “His roller blades were from Speed Sports—I saw that. But that shouldn’t help us much as the brand is quite common. And then there was a tattoo on his upper arm.”

“What tattoo?” Jupe asked.

“Miller.”

“Miller?” Jupe said.

“Yes. Miller—as in Miller’s Corn Flakes. The guy had the name ‘Miller’ tattooed on his arm in exactly the same lettering as logo of Miller’s Corn Flakes.”

Jupiter frowned. “Who gets a company logo tattooed on their arm? Very unusual. But all the better. We may be able to track down the thief using his tattoo. Come on, fellas. Let’s go back to Headquarters. We have some calls to make.”

On the way back to Rocky Beach, Jupiter pedalled faster than ever before. He hadn’t told Bob and Pete what he was up to, but the two of them already had a clue. This was confirmed when they followed the phone call Jupiter made as soon as they entered Headquarters.

“Hello, Henry? ... It’s Jupiter. I told you about our Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup once, didn’t I? ... Yes, exactly. We’re looking for someone who has an unusual tattoo on his upper arm... It’s the word ‘Miller’ in the same lettering as the Miller’s Corn Flakes logo... Yeah, on the

upper arm. You wouldn't happen to know anybody with a tattoo like that? ... Well, that would be a big coincidence. Look, I'd appreciate it if you'd call four or five people and spread the word. Ask them to call some friends and acquaintances and so on. If anybody should know someone with a Miller tattoo, ask them to contact us. You have our number... Yeah, Pete and Bob are also participating. That way the search will spread all over the city and reach several thousand people later this evening... Thanks, Henry. See you soon."

Jupiter hung up and grinned happily at his friends.

"The Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup, just as I thought," Pete said.

"This case is just perfect for its use," Jupiter said. "A tattoo like this is conspicuous. And if the lettering is the same as the Miller's Corn Flakes logo, it might even be unique."

Jupiter picked up the phone again and called another friend. After five calls, he handed the phone over to Pete. Half an hour later, they had made all the calls. The Hookup was in progress.

"Now we must wait," said Jupiter. "My guess is that we won't get a response before tomorrow. Until then, we should use the time to look into Jaccard and his letters." He keyed the notes they had taken onto a computer document.

"He spent the last weeks of his life obsessively working on a painting—in particular, one painting known as *Fire Moon*. I think it's best if we look it up. Bob?"

Bob was already leafing through a thick illustrated book he had borrowed from the library, but without success. He couldn't find a painting called *Fire Moon*. Not even in several other art books.

"Funny," Bob murmured. "Perhaps it's known by another name... or maybe it's not known at all."

"Not known? Hardly. After all, it was his last painting," pondered Jupiter. "But wait a minute, what did he say in his letters? It would give him great pleasure if *Fire Moon* will never be seen by anyone. Perhaps he really did put the idea into practice and showed no one the painting."

Pete frowned. "But what was the point of that—a painting that nobody sees?"

"Not nobody, only the smartest. That's what Jaccard wrote. He must have thought of something. In any case, it's a secret." An enthusiastic glow had entered Jupiter's eyes.

"Okay," Pete said. "So this is about the last painting by one of the world's most famous painters—a painting that doesn't even exist, but somehow it does. And you want to solve the mystery, Jupe. That doesn't sound dangerous for now, so I'm in." He smiled.

"I expected nothing less. First, we should find out as much as we can about Jaccard and his friend Hernández. Furthermore, I hope that the Hookup will bring some results soon... As it is now, I don't have a good feeling about this situation as we don't know who leaked the letters to us and then took them away immediately afterwards... And then, there's the explosion..."

"And Rubbish-George's warning!" Pete added.

Jupiter nodded. "We must be careful in any case."

When Bob came home that evening, his parents were sitting in the living room drinking wine. A warm fire crackled in the fireplace.

"Well, my son," his father greeted him. "Trouble? You look sad. Did Mathilda Jones make you clean up the salvage yard again?"

Bob's mother put her husband's hand on her forearm. "What would you look like if you had barely slept last night because you were in the middle of a building explosion?"

"I didn't really get injured in the explosion, Mum," Bob said. "Everything went fine."

"Yet you look tired. You should have stayed home today to recover from your shock instead of running back to the salvage yard."

"That's the best place for me to rest."

His mother sighed. "You're going straight to bed then, aren't you?"

"I have some work to do."

"Homework? But tomorrow's Sunday!"

Bob had not meant school homework, but perhaps it was better not to tell his parents that he was already on the verge of researching a new case for The Three Investigators. They would ask questions. And at the latest when they found out that the case was related to the explosion, it would be the end of their goodwill.

Bob followed a spontaneous intuition. "Yeah, but maybe you can help me. You know something about art, right?"

"Sort of," his mum said. "You know I have an interest in it."

"What do you think of Jean-Marie Jaccard? Or Raúl Hernández, perhaps?"

"Well, a lot of things," Mrs Andrews said. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything that you know."

Bob's mother cleared her throat and delivered résumés of the two painters from memory. But most of it was already known to Bob.

"Besides, Hernández was Jaccard's friend. But while Jaccard achieved world fame during his lifetime, Hernández never became so famous, not even after his death. There are critics who say that no one would know Hernández today if he hadn't been Jaccard's friend by chance."

"Why?" Bob asked. "Was he so much worse?"

"Worse?" his mother muttered. "What is good or bad in art? Hernández painted... um... how shall I say... differently. He was more playful. In fact, he tried every painting technique imaginable. And he was also a sculptor."

Bob frowned. "It actually sounds like he was more into it than Jaccard."

"That may even be true. What makes Jaccard's paintings world-famous is his unmistakable style. A Jaccard simply looks like a Jaccard. Nobody paints like him. But a Hernández can be mistaken. He has never had a unique artistic identity. And that's ultimately what makes art special, if you know what I mean."

"Well... almost," Bob muttered.

"There's a Hernández House in Oxnard with a permanent exhibit. He used to live in that house and now it's a little museum there. We might go there sometime if you're interested."

"Yeah, well... we'll see," Bob evaded the offer. "What about Jaccard? Have you seen his paintings?"

"Well, sure, a lot! *The Lady with the Hat*, *The Lily Field*..."

"Perhaps one called *Fire Moon*?"

"*Fire Moon*?" Mrs Andrews laughed.

"You know anything about it?" Bob asked. "I haven't found it in any illustrated art books."

"Well, I'm not surprised." His mother laughed again.

"Why not?"

"Because *Fire Moon* does not exist."

Jupiter sat at Headquarters for a long time and stared at the phone. Although he knew from experience that it usually took a day or more for the Hookup to produce its first results, he still hoped for some replies that evening.

While he sat at his desk and waited, he thought about the case. The explosion of the administration building had alarmed all of Rocky Beach and overshadowed the main topic of discussion of the last few weeks—the city’s upcoming 200th anniversary celebration. At dinner, Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus had talked about nothing else. And even the news was still full of it. The police had kept their findings to themselves for the time being. Nobody knew that a bomb had exploded, and Jupiter was careful not to divulge his knowledge at dinner.

But something else worried and alerted the First Investigator. It was the anonymous letter that led them to the mystery of Jaccard and Hernández. Not so long ago, The Three Investigators worked on a case that also involved paintings. It all started with a letter too. And that case had come to a catastrophic end. Although they had managed to seize the valuable paintings and unmask one of the criminals, it was more by chance and luck than anything. But what stood out was that Jupiter had messed up big time. He had not seen the most obvious clues. And even though he rarely spoke about it, that failure still haunted him.

He took a look at the filing cabinet. In one of the files were a collection of newspaper articles in which The Three Investigators were named. There were quite a few. Not every one of their cases had led to a press release, but if they had, they had always been mentioned in praise or even admiration. With one single exception...

Jupiter hesitated for a short moment, then he called himself to order. Just because this case started with a letter leading to a painting by a famous painter, as it was in the previous case, this did not mean that this case would end in disaster again. That was absolute nonsense! And the article would nicely stay where it was, namely in the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet. Jupiter had read it once and then banished it there in a rage. And there it should stay!

Frustrated, he turned to the phone again.

6. Anamorphosis

Apart from a few joggers, the beach was deserted the next day. The bad weather had driven all beach-goers away. Meanwhile the sun had completely disappeared behind a thick cloud cover and it seemed as if it would not show up again until the next summer.

“Look, they’re already working hard on Knox Island,” said Pete as he strolled along with Bob and Jupiter. He pointed to the small rock island off the coast of Rocky Beach. “I’m sure it’s ready for the bicentennial celebrations.”

“People call it Knox Island,” Jupiter complained. “Just because Charles Knox bought the island and settled down on it doesn’t mean you have to name it after him.”

“Knox brought a lot of money here,” Bob said. “Without him, there wouldn’t be such a huge city festival in two weeks. He’s the main sponsor of the whole show.”

“Yes. He bought his reputation, so to speak,” Jupiter remarked. “But anyway, let’s get on to more important things. You were gonna tell us what you found out, Bob. Go ahead.”

“My mother is an art enthusiast. She’s among those who thinks that *Fire Moon* does not exist.”

“A non-existing painting?” Jupiter said. “That doesn’t sound promising.”

“She said that *Fire Moon* was a kind of modern myth among connoisseurs. They say Jean-Marie Jaccard worked on this painting just before he died. But nobody has seen it. It seems to have disappeared. And a lot of people think that the painting never existed and that it is just a myth.”

“But Jaccard’s letters prove otherwise!” Pete exclaimed.

“That’s right, Pete,” Jupiter agreed. “The letters even clearly state that Jaccard would like to keep his work under wraps, even after his death. He wanted to hide it, so to speak. Only the smartest could unravel its secret. If the existence of *Fire Moon* is doubted in professional circles despite these letters, there are only two logical conclusions—either the letters are forgeries and not written by Jaccard... or the letters are genuine, but hardly anyone has read them.”

Bob and Pete thought about it for a while and finally nodded slowly.

“I’m sure I can find out tomorrow when I call the Jaccard Society,” Bob said.

“Good. Then I suggest we turn our backs on these inhospitable weather conditions and use the rest of the day for the only occupation that is virtually predestined for uncomfortable Sundays.”

“Which is?” Pete asked.

“A visit to the museum.”

“Hernández House in Oxnard?” Bob wondered.

“Exactly.”

On the way back to the car, Pete suddenly stopped.

“What’s wrong, Pete?” Bob asked.

Pete, looking at the road ahead and shook his head. “Oh, nothing.”

“Come on, tell us...” Bob urged. “What’s wrong?”

“There by the road,” Pete hesitantly began, “there was a car.”

“That’s nothing unusual on a road,” Jupe mocked.

“Not just any car... A Corvette. Black. I think... It just went around the corner.”

“Year of manufacture?” Jupe asked.

“I don’t know, I didn’t really see it that well. Fifties, I’d guess. But I could be wrong! I mean, it was really fast and...”

“It’s okay, Pete,” Jupiter said reassuringly. “That could have been a coincidence. We’ll keep our eyes open, okay? But we’re not going to let this make us crazy.”

Hernández House was a classic Spanish style house and stood in the middle of Oxnard. At first sight, it was not recognizable as a museum. Only the big brown sign at the entrance was an indication that it was a public building. There was a larger-than-life statue that adorned the forecourt.

Bob had used the long drive to Oxnard to tell his friends a little more about what he had already read about Jaccard and Hernández. Even Jupiter had been able to learn a few more details.

“Hernández, unlike his friend Jaccard, never settled on one style,” Bob explained on the way from the car park to the museum. “He tried out many different techniques and besides painting, he was also involved in sculpture. As a result, his art never took on a face of its own, at least that’s what my mother told me. When you see a Jaccard, you know immediately that that it is Jaccard, even if you haven’t seen the painting before. With Hernández, you can hardly do that. He was simply too versatile—a quality that is, surprisingly, not appreciated in the art world. But after Jaccard’s death, Hernández’s work was over, too. He did a few more paintings, and then he retired. He once said in an interview that ‘the sense of art left him after the death of his closest friend’.”

“Hmm,” mumbled Pete. “Very interesting. Shall we go in now?”

The museum was small and almost empty. On this cold Sunday, probably half of California had decided not to set foot outside. Only a handful of people moved leisurely from room to room, looking closely at the paintings on the walls. The wooden floor creaked with every step.

“That’s him,” Bob said when he recognized a self-portrait from his mother’s art encyclopedia. “Raúl Hernández.”

“This is Hernández?” Pete asked, stunned. “I can barely tell it’s even human.”

The painting showed his face in strangely pale colours and distorted shapes, as if seen in a broken mirror.

“For this self-portrait, he used classic elements from cubism,” Jupiter expertly remarked and pursed his lips.

“You don’t say.” Pete had already gone a few steps further and was standing in front of another painting. At first glance, there was no apparent motive. It looked as if the painter had tried something, but then gave up in the middle of it and blurred the still wet paint with his sleeve to a wide stripe. “And what is this? Also cubism?”

“No,” Jupe replied.

“Then what? A giant glob of bird droppings on a windscreen?”

Somebody laughed. The Three Investigators turned around. Behind them, a tall, middle-aged, strong woman had got up from a chair in the corner. She was wearing a blue uniform and a name tag, identifying her as a museum employee, and she approached The Three Investigators. “An interesting interpretation that Señor Hernández would certainly have

enjoyed. He was a joker, after all. In fact, the alleged bird droppings are also a self-portrait—a better one this time.”

Jupiter frowned. “A self-portrait? Then Hernández had a very strange perspective of himself.”

“Distorted,” Bob said.

“Excuse me?” Jupe asked.

“A distorted perspective, not strange.” Bob turned to the museum employee. “The painting is an anamorphosis, right?”

She nodded her approval. “I see we’re dealing with an art enthusiast. How gratifying that there are young people interested in art.”

“What is an anamorphosis,” Pete asked when he realized that Jupiter was not going to make any plans to give a lecture on this term this time.

“In an anamorphosis, the painter creates a distorted projection or perspective of an image,” Bob explained. “The image appears in its true form when viewed in some unconventional way.”

“The best thing is to look at it, and then you’ll understand it immediately,” said the woman, pointing to a red mark on the floor that The Three Investigators had not noticed earlier. “Stand here!”

The Second Investigator did not understand, but went to the mark and looked at the painting. He was standing so close to the wall that he now saw the painting very sharply cropped. And from this perspective, the smeared stripes suddenly stopped smearing and had shrunk to a compact form... into a face!

“Wow!” said Pete. “That’s amazing. Bob, Jupe, come here!”

The two were also amazed when they suddenly recognized what was depicted in the painting.

“An amazing visual effect,” Jupiter said. “The painter pulls the subject so extremely wide that it’s unintelligible to the viewer from a normal perspective... When you look at the painting from a very acute angle, it turns out differently.”

“It is very similar to those words and arrows painted on the road,” Bob remarked. “They’re actually stretched, so you can see them clearly when you’re in a car or on a bike. Strictly speaking, anamorphosis is not just a simple linear stretch. It is much more complicated.”

“So this distortion is like some kind of encryption,” Jupiter continued to think. “If you don’t know that you have to view it from the right perspective, the content of the painting remains hidden from you.”

“You could look at it that way,” said the museum employee. “But I think Hernández was more interested in trying a new technique with this painting than in encrypting something.”

“Perhaps,” Jupe continued. “Nevertheless, this technique allows you to convey certain content in a hidden manner.”

“You got that right,” the lady agreed. “In the Middle Ages, for example, anamorphoses were painted to disguise offensive messages. Señor Hernández also created some paintings that are encoded in a more complicated way. It is not enough to stand at a certain angle to the painting. You need specially shaped mirrors to reveal the image.”

“Fascinating,” Jupiter said. “Does this museum have such paintings?”

“Unfortunately, no. Hernández House only has a small collection. Over the years, many of his paintings have ended up in private hands.”

“Too bad. But you seem to know a great deal about Raúl Hernández, ma’am,” Jupiter commented.

"I'm a bit of a Hernández expert, otherwise I wouldn't be working here. If you want to know something—ask. That's what I'm here for."

"We are preparing a paper for school," Jupiter lied. "The task is to choose a local painter and talk about his life. We chose Hernández."

"Hence your interest..." the lady remarked.

"However, most of the information we have found relates to Hernández's connection to Jean-Marie Jaccard. After all, Jaccard is world-famous. So we thought we'd focus our presentation on that."

"I understand."

"Are there perhaps books on this subject? What they did together? Perhaps they used to work together... or maybe their correspondences have been published?" Jupiter had asked the question as bluntly as possible. Nevertheless, the museum employee expressed suspicion.

"Correspondences?"

"Yes. Or did they not write each other letters?" Jupiter continued.

She cleared her throat. "Um... yes, yes. There are letters. They were published in a book... at least some of them. The rest are missing. Actually, it's a book about Jaccard, but there are some letters from Hernández in it. You can find it in the museum shop downstairs."

"Ah. Thank you very much. We'll check that out later."

"Yes. Good... Then I'll be on my way. I think someone over there has a question." The lady nodded at The Three Investigators, then took a quick step into the next room.

"Why is she gone all of a sudden?" Bob whispered.

"Interesting question, Bob," Juve said. "I think we should put a question mark over this lady."

At the museum shop, Jupiter bought all the books he found helpful, plus a small craft kit with which one could use to understand and demonstrate anamorphoses. With this, he severely burdened the common fund of their detective agency, but he didn't care. On his way out, he had already started to leaf through one of the books.

"What do we do now?" asked Pete as they stood in front of his MG. "Are we going home now?"

Jupiter did not answer.

"Whatever," Bob said. "I guess our trip to the museum wasn't all that great. What do you think, Juve?"

Jupiter was still absorbed in the book and showed no reaction.

"I suppose that means 'All right, fellas, do whatever you want as long as I'm not behind the wheel and can continue reading in peace'," Pete said.

Jupiter looked up. "No, it doesn't mean that, Pete. We'll stay in Oxnard for a while."

"Oh... and why?" Pete asked.

"That's why," Jupiter said, tapping on a page of one of the books.

Bob looked over the shoulder of the First Investigator. "A letter from Hernández to Jaccard?"

"Right. Written on 9 August, a few days before Jaccard's death. It is likely that Jaccard got to read it in time."

"How tragic," Pete thought. "And what does it say?"

Jupiter skimmed over the text and read only the crucial passage:

... Fire Moon is not only your legacy, but also the legacy of our friendship. I look forward to seeing it soon. Then I will make it disappear. And only those who understand

the clues at the tombs will be able to unravel it. So I too will never know in my lifetime if the mystery will ever be solved. This is another thing we both share—you and I...

Jupiter looked at his friends expectantly. “So?”

“So what?” Bob asked.

“Well, don’t you see? The clues on the tombs! That was already mentioned in the letters we read earlier. But I hadn’t understood what tombs they meant. But here it is clearer—it is about the tombs of Jaccard and Hernández! They must have arranged during their lifetime for some kind of clue to be written on their tombs—perhaps they are epitaphs that give clues to *Fire Moon*. And only the smartest will unravel the secret!”

“And then what?” Pete asked.

“Didn’t you say Hernández died in Oxnard, Bob?” Jupiter asked and Bob nodded. “Then I suppose he’s buried here too.”

Another look at the books from the museum shop provided the answer. “Bingo. He is buried in the Fifth Street cemetery. That’s not far from here. Come on, fellas,” Jupe urged.

7. Hernández's Tomb

The cemetery of Oxnard was beautifully located. From a green hill, one could see over a part of the city up to the leaden sea. In the shade of high pine trees, there were weathered tombstones. Some of the tombs were more than a hundred years old, as The Three Investigators discovered when they slowly walked through the rows and read the inscriptions.

Before long, they had found Hernández's tomb. It was surprisingly simple. The Three Investigators expected a lavish tomb—with a large stone cross or a sculpture, perhaps even a crypt. Instead they found an inconspicuous, mossy tombstone on a small grave site. It looked almost pathetic.

"I guess Hernández didn't think much of posthumous bragging," Jupiter remarked.

"Post what?" Pete asked.

"Posthumous. After death."

"I see."

"I could imagine that even when he was alive, he would not build himself a mausoleum or anything," Bob pondered.

"If that's the case, then he certainly didn't leave it to chance what the inscription on his tombstone would read," said Jupiter, pointing with interest at the fragile rock. On it, apart from the name and the dates of birth and death, there was only one sentence:

*If you have seen the world,
you have already seen a lot,
but you only know half the truth.*

"Strange," mumbled Pete. "What do you suppose it means? Does it mean anything?"

"You bet," Bob cried suddenly. He unbuckled his backpack from his back, threw it to the ground, crouched down and rummaged about in it.

"Bob!" Pete said anxiously. "What are you doing?"

"I'm looking for a book I that borrowed from the library yesterday. I hope I have it with me. Ah, yes, here it is!"

Bob pulled a well-thumbed-out volume from his backpack and flipped through it. Jupiter realized that it was a Jaccard biography.

"I knew it! There!" Bob tapped a picture with his finger and held the page up to his friends. It was a photograph of a burial site, but much larger and more impressive than the one they were standing in front of.

"What is this?" Pete asked.

"A photograph of Jean-Marie Jaccard's tomb in Paris," Bob said.

"So?" Pete wondered.

"Look closely!" Bob exclaimed.

"There's an inscription engraved there as well," Jupiter noticed and held the book closer to his eyes. "It is in French."

*Si tu as vu la dernière œuvre,
tu as déjà vu beaucoup,*

mais tu ne connais que la moitié de la vérité.

“Under the photo is the translation,” Bob said.

Now Jupiter raised his eyebrows in amazement. “This is remarkable.”

“What?” Pete urged, and now he snatched the book himself. The translation was:

*If you have seen the last work,
you have already seen a lot,
but you only know half the truth.*

“Wow,” Pete said. “Okay, I agree with you—it means something. Just what?”

“That is quite clear,” Jupiter replied excitedly. “If you have seen the world, that is one half of the truth; and the last work is the other half. So you just have to put them both together—and you have the whole truth.”

Pete opened his mouth—and closed it again. He opened it again. “Uh...”

“Come on, Pete. It’s not that hard to understand, is it?” Jupiter remarked.

“Well, yeah, not really, but what are we supposed to do with it?” Pete asked.

Jupiter shook his head. “I have absolutely no idea.”

After returning to Headquarters, The Three Investigators spent the rest of the day pondering the mysterious inscriptions on the tombstones. But it was no use—they didn’t get any further. There was a deeper meaning, they were sure of it, given the many clues they had already come across. But apparently they still lacked some information to put the puzzle together.

To their disappointment, nobody responded to the Hookup that day. Frustrated, Bob and Pete finally made their way home.

The next day Bob caught his friends at school for lunch. He had news. They sat down at a table in the cafeteria and put their heads together.

“I just had a free period,” he reported. “I called the Jaccard Society. Imagine what I found out!”

“Well, spit it out,” Pete demanded. “Not your food, Bob, but what you found out!”

“The three Jaccard letters we held in our hands were discovered only a few weeks ago in some dusty attic in Oxnard. Until recently, no one knew they existed at all. After Hernández’s death, someone must have snatched them.”

“Aha,” said Jupiter. “That explains why *Fire Moon* was considered a legend until now.”

“Yes. In any case, the discovery of the letters was known to specialist circles, but the contents were not published or released. The Jaccard Society is considering to save this for the next major exhibition, as an added attraction, so to speak. I tried to get an insight as to what the letters said, but they are not telling me, which is not surprising.”

“Interesting,” Jupiter said.

“Wait for it, Juve... The best is yet to come,” Bob continued. “Shortly after the discovery of the letters were known, they were stolen... a week ago.”

Jupiter raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Now that’s actually more interesting.”

“But what does that mean?” Pete asked. “That someone stole the letters and gave them to us to read?”

“Another question we can only speculate so far,” Jupiter mumbled in frustration. “It is imperative that we find out where this Miller is and who hired him! Otherwise we won’t get

anywhere. Hopefully someone will respond to the Hookup today!”

This time, The Three Investigators were lucky. When they hurried to the salvage yard after school and entered Headquarters, the red light on the answering machine was flashing.

Pete checked the machine and cried enthusiastically: “Three calls! Finally!”

“Well, let’s hear it!” Jupiter exclaimed.

The Second Investigator played the first message.

“Hi, this is Thea Summers from Venice. Um... I hope I’m calling the right place... The Three Investigators, right? So, my friend called me and told me that you’re looking for someone with a Kellogg’s Corn Flakes tattoo. Well, I don’t know anybody, but there’s a tattoo parlour here in Venice that might do that. It’s not cheap, though. If you’re interested, you can get in touch.”

The girl gave a phone number, but none of the three took it down.

“Kellogg?” Bob cried and slapped his forehead. “We specifically said ‘Miller’, not ‘Kellogg’!”

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. “This happens. If the message is passed from one person to another so often, it is likely to end up slightly distorted.”

“Well, at least she’s got the corn flakes part right, though,” muttered Bob.

“Play the second message, Pete,” Jupiter urged.

This time it was a man who had left a message on the answering machine. “Hey, guys, what’s up? You’re looking for people with weird tattoos, right? You got it. I got a farting penguin on my back. Hey, not everybody has that. And next week, there might be a puking camel. If that’s not cool, I don’t know what is! So, I would like to get involved in your project. But one thing’s for sure—nothing works without moolah. You’re gonna have to pay me to show you the penguin. So, boys, how’s it gonna be?”

The telephone number of the caller was lost in the whinnying laughter of The Three Investigators. Pete burst out hysterically laughing and threw himself into the next chair, while Bob gasped desperately for breath and struggled with tears.

Jupiter was the first to say a few words, panting: “You can say whatever you want about the efficiency of the Hookup... it has humorous potential!”

“Humorous potential?” Pete repeated with a giggle. “This guy is awesome! Let’s play it again.” The Second Investigator played back the message. And then again... and again... finally, everyone laughed so hard that their stomachs hurt.

“Stop it!” cried Bob. “Please! I can’t go on!”

“One more time!” Pete suggested.

“No!” Jupiter protested with a laugh. “Stop it! A little more serious, if you please!” He took a deep breath. “Pete, would you please play the third message?”

“Certainly,” Pete agreed.

The last caller was a boy. He sounded a little younger than The Three Investigators. “Hello. This is Kent. I live in Santa Monica. I heard about your request. I’m not sure I got it right... You’re looking for someone with a Miller tattoo on his upper arm? I think I know who you are looking for. I know a guy who hangs out at the beach with a bunch of guys. He’s a skater guy. He’s in one of those cliques that, you know, you don’t really wanna be in. But anyway, he has a Miller tattoo and his friends call him that—Miller... Must be his nickname. If you want to know more, call me.”

8. On Miller's Trail

The dusk slowly set in and the street lamps on the promenade of Santa Monica gradually lit up as The Three Investigators headed for the skateboard park.

They had phoned Kent and found out that Miller and his clique were often there at sunset. At the half-pipes, they practised tricks with their skateboards and inline skates. Later in the evening, they would group together around camp fires on the beach. Immediately Jupiter, Pete and Bob had developed a plan and set off in the hope that Miller would be there today.

"There it is," Pete said and pointed to the concrete square between the beach and the promenade where a good dozen skaters rode over small and large ramps, jumped through the air with their boards and did endless laps in the half-pipe. The Three Investigators stopped and watched the action from a safe distance.

"Do you see him?" Bob asked with narrowed eyes.

Jupiter shook his head slowly. "But I'm not sure if I would recognize him without his sunglasses."

"We have to get closer," Bob said. "He's sure to recognize us. And if we are alert, we can tell by his reaction."

They got off their bikes and Pete unbuckled his backpack and opened it.

"What are you doing?" Jupiter asked.

Triumphantly grinning, Pete pulled out a pair of roller blades. "What does this look like?" He took off his sneakers and put on the roller blades.

"You want to mingle inconspicuously with the others?" Jupiter suspected. "That's an excellent idea, Pete!"

"Not only that, Juve," Pete said. "My main concern is to make sure this guy doesn't slip away from me again. Let's see if I can match him for speed."

"Just be careful," Bob cautioned. "When I think how breakneck he was yesterday, plodding through the middle of the crowd—that can get pretty nasty."

"Well, let's see!" Pete laced up his roller blades, did a casual lap, slalomed around three joggers and skated skilfully over a gap in the pavement, and returned to the others.

"Did you bring our special weapon?" Jupiter asked.

Pete nodded and held out a small, round button taken from the crime lab at Headquarters.

"Very good. I—" Jupiter interrupted himself. "Wait a minute! I think I recognize him after all! Over there!" He pointed unobtrusively at the promenade.

There were some skaters there. One of them had blowing light blond hair. Despite the cold, he wore a sleeveless hooded shirt and on his right upper arm, a tattoo was clearly visible. At a distance, Jupiter couldn't see what the motif was, but one thing was certain... it was letters.

"That's him!" Jupiter was convinced.

Pete nodded slowly. "Yes, you're right. What a show-off. He makes his rounds around the passers-by as if he was getting paid for it. His skater friends probably aren't enough of an audience for him anymore."

The three watched Miller from a safe distance for a while. Miller used the passers-by as slalom poles and always rushed past them by a hair's breadth. Then he apparently misjudged a curve and rammed into a man. The Three Investigators were too far away to follow the conversation, but from the gestures, they concluded that Miller profusely apologized to the man and then left.

"Well, at least he's polite," growled Pete.

"No way," Bob objected. "Did you see it?"

"See what?" Pete wondered.

"He took something off the man when he grazed him! My guess is his wallet!"

"You're kidding!" Pete exclaimed.

"No, I did not," Bob insisted. "I watched him very closely."

"Okay, I'll get him!" Pete, followed by Bob and Jupiter, made his way to the skating rink where Miller had retired to. He was in the half-pipe and took a few turns until he reached the top of the platform. There he pulled a wallet out of his pocket and inspected his booty in peace.

When Pete reached the square, nobody paid attention to him at first. But then the Second Investigator picked up speed, skated over a ramp, turned once around his own axis with his legs tightened and came to a safe stop. He immediately attracted attention. There were two boys, a few years younger than The Three Investigators, who nodded at Pete appreciatively. A girl with red braids gave him furtive looks. And Miller finally noticed him but turned away instantly.

"Come, Jupel!" whispered Bob. "We'll cut him off!"

But at that moment, Miller spotted the two running towards him. He stared at them for a second, and then abandoned his attempt to be inconspicuous. He jumped into the half-pipe, raced vertically down, made a turn and flew sideways out of the pipe. What looked like a failed manoeuvre for a moment turned out to be quite intentional a second later. Miller landed safely on the rollers of his blades and took off.

Pete set off immediately. He accelerated so fast that he almost fell. He was determined to get Miller this time! Guaranteed!

The fugitive raced towards the low wall that bordered the skating area. He dropped to his knees, gained momentum and shot up. Miller only almost made it. His left foot got caught on the edge of the wall. He rowed wildly with his arms, flew over the wall in a spectacular arc, rolled over in the air and landed hard on his back. But only a moment later, he was back on his feet.

Now Pete was at the wall. He also gathered his strength, pushed off and passed the obstacle without any problems. The momentum drove him straight towards Miller, who was just about to get going again. Pete stretched out his hands, grabbed Miller and dragged him down.

"Hand over the wallet," Pete hissed as he held Miller tightly.

"The... what? What do you want from me, you freak?" Miller yelled.

"The wallet you just took from that man! Give it to me!" Pete yelled back.

Miller was so surprised that he hardly hesitated. With his free hand he reached into his pocket and pulled out the wallet. Pete took it from him and intentionally loosened his grip. As expected, Miller took the opportunity to break free and fled. Pete made a half-hearted chase, deliberately rammed a concrete pillar and let Miller escape. Then he searched the promenade, found the man and gave him back his wallet. The man, apparently a German, thanked him a thousand times, but Pete had no time for that. He quickly returned to his friends who had been watching everything very closely.

“Great, Pete!” Bob cried and patted the Second Investigator on the shoulder. “You showed him!”

“I told you so,” Pete said. “So? Have you got him on the screen yet?”

Jupiter held up a receiver—a small device with a display built into it. On the display, a green dot was flashing, slowly moving away from the centre of the screen. “There it is. Where did you put the transmitter, Pete?”

“In his pocket,” Pete replied. “It’ll be a while before he realizes that.”

“Good. Then we better get back to the bikes before he’s out of range. If I’m not mistaken, Miller should be extremely confused by the fact that we showed up here. And with a bit of luck, he’ll go straight to his employer to let him know what has happened. And then we’ll know who our mysterious informant is.”

9. The Trail Through the Canyon

The Three Investigators followed Miller through half of Santa Monica without ever seeing him. They kept so much distance that there was always a block or two between them and the green flashing dot. Then, in an inconspicuous residential area, the signal suddenly stopped. Jupiter, Pete and Bob rode a little further until only a street corner separated them from Miller.

"He seems to have reached his destination," Jupe muttered as his gaze was fixed on the receiver's display.

Pete got off his bike. "I'm going to take a peek." He crept to the corner and gently put his head out. Fifty metres away, Miller was sitting on the doorstep of a small white family home, hastily taking off the roller blades from his feet.

"What's he doing?" whispered Bob.

"I guess he lives there," Pete replied. "Now he put his skates on the porch and put on regular shoes. He is in quite a hurry. Oh, bummer!"

"What is it?" Jupiter asked excitedly. "Did he see you?"

"No. He grabbed a helmet and got on a motorcycle and..."

Pete didn't have to say more, because now they all heard the roar of the engine. Pete watched as Miller shot out of the driveway at full throttle, made a big turn over the oncoming lane, causing some cars to honk at him. Then he disappeared around the next corner.

"After him!" Bob cried.

"Hopeless," Jupiter moaned. "He's much too fast. We'll never catch him with the bikes!"

"We'll see about that!" The Second Investigator snatched the receiver out of Jupe's hand and started pedalling. Luckily he had left his mountain bike at home today and decided to go for his road bike. With it, he now reached Miller's house within a few seconds and a moment later, he had also disappeared around the corner.

Miller was still in sight. He was heading for the outskirts of Santa Monica. Pete bent over the handlebars, imagined he was in the Tour de France, and accelerated. Although he did not manage to catch up, but the gap did not increase either. The traffic lights and the dense traffic in the city slowed Miller down enough so that Pete did not lose connection. But that changed abruptly when they reached the Santa Monica border and Miller turned into a road that led directly into the mountains.

"Rustic Canyon," Pete read on a sign by the side of the road. There were no intersections, no traffic lights and hardly any traffic. The motorcycle shot off and was first out of sight and then out of earshot.

The sun had set in the meantime. In the city, it had still been bright but here, it was getting dimmer by the minute. Pete gasped. To make matters worse, things were now going uphill, and after a short time, sweat was on his forehead. Again and again, Pete took a look at the receiver. The signal point moved further and further away from the centre of the display until it finally disappeared completely. Miller was out of range.

But Pete did not give up. He'd been through this canyon before. As far as he knew, there was no turn off for the next few kilometres. Miller could only go straight ahead, which meant that Pete was far from losing his trail.

Further and further, he went up the mountains. There were only a few houses left. The road became worse, the landscape wilder and drier, and it got darker. Suddenly, the signal was back. Pete moved directly towards it. Miller seemed to have stopped. Three hundred metres further on, Pete spotted the motorcycle at the side of the road. There was no sign of Miller.

Where the motorcycle was parked, there was a path leading into the mountains, which Pete would certainly have overlooked when driving past. It was almost completely overgrown with thorny bushes that the cold wind tugged at. At its beginning, there was a bizarrely-shaped shrub that looked like a primeval animal. The Second Investigator rode a little further and hid his bike behind thick bushes. Then he pulled out his mobile phone and called Jupiter.

“Pete?” Jupiter reported almost instantly. “Where are you?”

“In Rustic Canyon. I followed Miller up to the mountains. There’s a little path I think he went up on foot. Should I go after him?”

“Yes. But be careful. Don’t let him catch you. When in doubt, wait for us. We’ll be there in five minutes.”

Pete hung up and crept through the underbrush under cover of dusk, avoiding the path. Soon it was a little downhill and a wide, barren valley spread out before Pete. It was already almost dark. At the edge of the valley, only fifty metres from Pete, there was a small wooden house, painted grey, with lights on behind its windows. An off-road vehicle was parked in front of it. And now Pete also spotted Miller, who was heading straight for the house and knocked.

It took a moment before the door was opened and a dark silhouette appeared at the entrance. That was all the Second Investigator could see at that distance. After a brief moment, Miller entered the house and the door was closed.

Pete crouched down and watched the house for a while. Now what? Should he continue on his own? Bob and Jupiter would never be here in five minutes, as the First Investigator had stated. By bike, they needed at least twenty minutes. By then, Miller might have already left. On the other hand...

Suddenly Pete heard a noise. Footsteps approached. The Second Investigator ducked even deeper into the undergrowth. Someone came from the road. The steps were slow and careful, as if someone was trying to sneak up on him. Pete’s heart was beating faster. Had Miller noticed all along that he’d been after him? Had Pete fallen into a trap? Should he stay in his hiding place or flee? Could it be Night Shadow?

Just when Pete noticed that there were at least two people approaching him, they appeared before him—two large, dark shadows in the twilight. They had not seen him. But with three more steps, they would stumble over him.

“Where is he?” murmured one figure to the other, and Pete was relieved. He jumped up.

“Jupe! Bob! It’s you!”

Jupiter and Bob were so frightened that they jumped backwards.

“Pete!” Bob hissed angrily. “Have you gone mad, scaring us like this?”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to... How come you are here so fast? It took me so long.”

“We took a taxi and saw Miller’s motorcycle by the road,” Jupiter explained succinctly. “What is the situation?”

“Miller’s down there in that house,” Pete reported. “Somebody opened the door and he went in, but I couldn’t see anything.”

“Our informant and Miller’s employer,” Jupiter said. “I bet it is him! Come on, fellas! Let’s sneak closer!”

Crouching, The Three Investigators went down the slope, made a large arc around the house and approached it from behind. From afar, the house had a dilapidated impression, but from up close, it was clear that it only needed a new coat of paint and was otherwise in good condition. This was no ominous secret meeting place, but someone lived here—that much was certain.

“Maybe we can find an open window somewhere,” whispered Jupiter, when they were only ten metres away.

“You don’t wanna get in that house with Miller and Mr X in it, do you?” Pete gasped.

Jupiter did not answer.

“You want to do it!” Pete exclaimed.

“Only if it cannot be avoided,” Jupiter said. “But for the time being, I would prefer to eavesdrop on them.”

“Over here!” hissed Bob, who had already sneaked on a bit. “There’s a window open here! I hear voices!”

They sneaked up towards the house until they were crouched under the open window. The voices were not very loud, but clear enough to understand.

“So you’re sure this doesn’t mean anything?” Although Jupiter had only heard him speak briefly once, he recognized Miller’s voice immediately.

“No,” was the answer. It was a woman’s voice. “Honestly, no. You must know that I’ve dealt with these three guys before. I can tell you that you should never underestimate them. It’s a mystery to me, though, how they got onto your trail. It was probably just a coincidence. Maybe you should avoid Santa Monica Beach for the next few days.”

While the young woman was speaking, the thoughts of the First Investigator drifted away. He knew that voice! He definitely knew it! His hunch condensed into a name and a face, but he didn’t dare to look through the window.

Miller went on to say: “Wait a minute! But that wasn’t agreed! I’m not gonna hide for days. You didn’t pay me to hide!”

“Fine. Your call. Then let the three of them catch you picking pockets and report you for taking money from tourists. But I won’t have anything to do with it anymore!”

“Do you really think they’d turn me in?”

“I don’t know, Miller. As for the incident today at the skateboard park, that’s your business. I have nothing to do with that. It’ll only become dangerous for you if you tell them who told you to give them the letters.”

For a while there was silence. Jupiter looked at Pete and Bob. They looked as if they recognized the woman’s voice as well.

“All right,” said Miller sheepishly. “I’ll be on my way, then.”

“Okay, Miller. So long.”

The Three Investigators heard the door on the other side of the house open and slowly steps went through the dry grass.

Bob gave the First Investigator a very telling look. “Say, wasn’t that—”

“Shh!” Jupiter warned and pointed to the open window. Now that no one was talking inside the house, they had to be very careful. A look through the window was still too risky. There had to be a safe way to check his suspicions.

But even before he had an idea, something rang in the house. It was a mobile phone. The Three Investigators held their breath.

The woman answered the phone. “Yes? ... Oh, good evening, sir... No, I’m fine. I’m free. What’s this about? ... Good. Tomorrow at noon, at the Chinese Theatre... No problem, I’ll be there. Goodbye, Monsieur Huguenay.”

Jupiter's head was twitching. Pete's and Bob's faces reflected sheer horror. And suddenly the First Investigator couldn't pull himself together. He shot up into the air and looked through the window into the house.

There she stood, her back to him, her eyes still fixed on the mobile phone. With her hand, she stroked the honey-blond hair from her face.

It was indeed Brittany!

10. Child Detectives on the Wrong Track

Child Detectives on the Wrong Track
by Wilbur Graham

How master thief Victor Hugenay almost succeeded in stealing art treasures worth several million dollars again through the detective game of three juvenile investigators.

The Los Angeles Tribune has often reported on three infamous child detectives from Rocky Beach who call themselves 'The Three Investigators'. Well-known to the police, this children's trio is led by the self-appointed First Investigator, Jupiter Jones. They once again delivered a first-class performance—and finally exposed themselves as the irresponsible, self-righteous teenage brats they always were.

The story begins with the legendary master thief Victor Hugenay, who for decades has succeeded in fooling the police throughout Europe. Hugenay has also repeatedly escaped the pursuers in the United States—including these three wannabe detectives.

A while ago, he led his pursuers to believe that he had died on a mountaineering expedition in France. In fact, this was the only way Hugenay escaped the increasingly dense network of his pursuers. From then on, anxious to preserve his death cover, he sent The Three Investigators a supposedly last letter disclosing the hiding place of an art loot worth several million dollars. The master thief's plan was to have Jupiter Jones and his two goofy sidekicks find the hiding place and recover the paintings for him.

To keep an eye on the pseudo-detectives, Hugenay engaged an ice-cold angel in the shape of a pretty blonde known as Brittany. She effortlessly wrapped the First Investigator around her finger. A hormone surge obviously caused not only pimples to sprout in Jupiter Jones, but also wild fantasies, as he actually believed that Brittany was suffering from a serious illness. The irresponsible teenager was immediately prepared to give his new-found love the valuable paintings to pay for a supposedly life-saving operation.

It was solely thanks to an alert journalist from the Los Angeles Tribune that the paintings were secured at the last moment. However, the confusion caused by Jupiter Jones and his naïve friends prevented the arrest of Victor Hugenay and his accomplice—the First Investigator's love interest.

With this case, The Three Investigators' incomprehensible reputation with the Rocky Beach Police Department should be finally over. Real detective work should only be handled by adult professionals.

Jupiter lowered the newspaper clipping that he retrieved from the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet. Two seconds later, he stared at it and read it again.

"Just stop reading that stupid article," Pete demanded as he walked up and down hectically in the limited space of the trailer. "This must be the third time you've read it. It makes me tingle all over! We really have other things to worry about right now! I mean—Brittany! She's behind all this! I can't believe this is happening! Thank goodness she doesn't know we're onto her yet. But if I hadn't pulled you away from that window, then—"

“Well, give it a rest, Pete,” Bob gruffly interrupted the Second Investigator. “Jupe can’t get a word in with the way you’re ranting.”

“There’s enough to get excited about,” growled Pete, but then remained silent and looked at Jupiter expectantly.

Jupiter said nothing. In fact, he had just read the article for the fourth time.

“Come on, Jupe!” Bob said. “Since we got back, you haven’t said a word. But we have to agree on what to do now. And this article—”

“This article marks the shattering low point of our detective career,” Jupiter finally broke his silence. “And shall I tell you why, Bob? Not because of the malicious slander that Wilbur Graham put into such pretty words... Not because he calls us irresponsible teenage brats or whatever... But because he’s right. He’s right about every word. We acted like complete idiots back then. No, not us... Me! ... I was an absolute idiot, and it was pure coincidence that we got out of that situation in one piece! Had I been sceptical about Brittany from day one, none of this would have happened!”

Pete shook his head vigorously. “Not really, Jupe. You can’t help it at all. She was so calculating and mean, probably everyone would have fallen for her. Besides, you really liked her. It’s easy to forget the scepticism.”

The words hit Jupiter like a slap in the face. He did not know why himself, and he had no idea what to say in reply.

“Why are you looking at me like that, Jupe?” Pete asked. “Did I say something wrong?”

“What? No. I...” Jupe stammered.

Bob cleared his throat. “What difference does it make now? That story is long over. What matters more is what we’re supposed to do now. Memorizing Graham’s article is not going to help us.”

Jupiter sighed. “You’re right.” He put the article down. Pete immediately grabbed it and stuffed it into the waste basket.

“So Hugenay,” said Jupiter. “He is back... After we discovered then that his death was faked, the police must have been hot on his trail. I actually expected him to go into hiding for a long time... but I guess I underestimated him... And so did Brittany.”

“And they both have a plan,” Bob added.

“That much is clear,” Pete said. “But what kind of plan is that? Why is Brittany having the Jaccard letters delivered to us?”

“That’s obvious,” Jupiter replied quickly, happy to be back on the safe terrain of logical deduction, speculation and reasoning. “She is up to something, just like last time... and she wants to use us for her own purposes.”

“Oh,” Bob said. “And how? I mean, what were we supposed to do about her now? It’s a total mystery to me.”

Jupe nodded thoughtfully. “Me too, actually...” He wanted to say: ‘I know how to find out’, and had already opened his mouth, but then he kept quiet. Yes, he had an idea... but did he really want to pursue it? Did he really want to expose himself to it? Wouldn’t it be better for once to shut up and do nothing at all? Should he just let it go?

“I know how to find out,” Pete said.

Jupiter looked at him in surprise.

“Brittany did talk to Hugenay,” Pete said. “And they’ve set a date for something—noon tomorrow, at the Chinese Theatre. You know what? Let’s call Inspector Cotta. He’ll send some men to arrest Hugenay and then we’ll have one less problem that’s been bothering us and the world for years.”

“Hold it, hold it!” Bob objected and raised his hands in warning. “Brittany didn’t say she was meeting with Hugenay tomorrow. She just said the time and the place. Anything can happen tomorrow at noon at the Chinese Theatre.”

“True again,” Pete admitted. “But either way, we should be there. We’ll know more then. Brittany won’t mess with us again. Right, Jupe? ... Jupe! Are you even listening?”

“Huh?” Jupiter jumped up. “Yeah, sure. I’m listening. Tomorrow at twelve. That’s a good plan.”

But Bob and Pete noticed immediately that there was something wrong with the First Investigator.

“Maybe... we should go now,” Bob hesitantly suggested. “It’s been a long day. And tomorrow... tomorrow’s Tuesday! We’re still in school at noon. How are we supposed to...”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter,” Pete replied and waved away. “We’ll only miss the last two hours. In my case, that’s maths and history. I can do without both.”

“If I remember your last exam results correctly, you can’t afford to miss those lessons,” Bob reminded.

“Oh, come on, Bob! When I’m old and grey, nobody will care about two missed school hours! But if I can help put the notorious master thief Victor Hugenay behind bars, I’ll be able to tell my great-grandchildren about that!”

“Okay, I’m convinced,” Bob said.

Bob and Pete packed their things and proceeded to go. Standing in the doorway, Pete turned to Jupiter once more. “Don’t brood so much, Jupe.”

“What makes you think I’m brooding?”

“Are you kidding? But believe me, it won’t get you anywhere. The story about Brittany is long over. Just forget about it, okay?”

Jupe nodded. “Sure.”

Pete and Bob left Headquarters. Jupiter watched them through the window until they disappeared through Red Gate Rover—the secret opening in the wooden fence.

Outside it was now dark. Jupiter waited until he was sure that the two were really on their way home and would not return again. Then he turned to the waste basket, fished the newspaper article out again and read it for the fifth—but not the last—time that evening.

11. High Noon

Jupiter had a stomach ache. Bob had a toothache. And Pete sprained his foot in gym class. With these excuses, The Three Investigators left school and headed off to Hollywood. They were sitting in Pete's red MG and the Second Investigator had the heating on because that was how cold it had become. Each one had his own thoughts. They hadn't worked out a plan. Instead, they would observe what was going on at noon on Hollywood Boulevard in front of the Chinese Theatre, and then decide what to do next.

Hollywood Boulevard was crowded with tourists walking along the famous Hollywood Walk of Fame, where hundreds of entertainment personalities were honoured with a star set into the side walk.

Pete stopped at the roadside under a palm tree opposite the Chinese Theatre. This theatre was so named because it was designed to be a Chinese-styled palace-type theatre. Among its most famous features are the concrete slabs in the forecourt which bear the signatures, footprints, and handprints of popular personalities. Many tourists were crowded here as well.

"I hope we can find Brittany in this crowd," muttered Pete. "Shall we go out?"

Jupiter shook his head. "From here, we have the best view. There's so much going on there that no one will notice us, I hope." He looked at his watch. "Five more minutes."

The Three Investigators tried to locate Brittany somewhere among the unstoppable stream of people pushing themselves across the side walk.

Suddenly Pete ducked deeper into the driver's seat. "There she is."

"Where?" Jupe asked.

"Over there by the wall, with a newspaper in her hand! She was there the whole time, I think we just didn't recognize her with that dark baseball cap!"

It took Jupiter and Bob a moment to see the girl.

"Yes, it's her," Bob murmured and also slipped a little deeper on the car seat. "I wonder if she saw us."

"I don't think so," Jupiter replied and his gaze was fixed to the other side of the street. "She doesn't know we're here, not the slightest bit. She seems to be looking out for someone in particular."

"Look, someone is walking towards her!" Bob exclaimed, squinting his eyes together.

A man in a black coat had appeared, and he was going straight towards Brittany. He had black hair and he was tall and dark, probably Mexican. He stopped right next to Brittany and started talking to her. It looked like he was asking her for directions. Finally, he even pulled out a map and showed it to her.

Pete sighed. "False alarm, fellas. Just a tourist."

Bob nodded and was about to turn away, when he discovered something. "He's not a tourist! Look! She just slipped him something!"

Jupiter straightened up. "Excuse me?"

"Yes, it looked like an envelope. She put it in the man's hand under the map so no one would notice! The asking for directions was just a cover!"

"The guy puts the map and the envelope in his pocket," Pete kept watching. "And now he leaves. What now, Jupe?"

“We have to go after him,” the First Investigator decided. “You two go after the guy, I’ll keep watching Brittany!”

The Three Investigators climbed out of the car, nodded at each other briefly, then they parted ways. Bob and Pete went after the Mexican. The man gave up his cover after only a few metres and walked along the road as quickly and confidently as only a local would.

“He’s not a tourist,” Pete reaffirmed, taking care not to get too close to the man, but also not to lose sight of him.

Two blocks away, the stranger headed for a car parked at the side of the road. The radiator grill of the black convertible, polished to a high gloss, was so monstrous that it reminded one of a tooth-fluttering monster. Without opening the door, the man jumped light-footedly into the car with his coat fluttering behind him. The engine roared powerfully, the double headlights flashed and the Mexican shot out of the car park.

“Darn,” Bob cursed. “Come on, Pete, we gotta go get back to your car and go after him!”

But Pete did not react at all. He had stopped, rooted to the ground and stared at the car.

“Pete! What’s wrong? Come on, maybe we can still make it!”

“No way,” replied the Second Investigator. “Didn’t you recognize the car?”

“The car? No.”

“That is a ’58 Corvette. That man is Night Shadow!”

Brittany took a look at her watch, folded up the newspaper and slowly set off. Jupiter had stood halfway behind the trunk of a palm tree and watched her. Now he followed her with the wide Hollywood Boulevard between them and didn’t let her out of his sight.

She was hardly recognizable. Her clothes, her walk, everything seemed strange—like a disguise. No, he corrected himself. This was not a disguise. This was her actual self. The Brittany from back then was a disguise. Nothing about her had been real—neither her smile, nor her illness, nor her interest in the junk at the salvage yard, not to mention her interest in Jupiter.

The First Investigator had sometimes imagined how he would react if he met Brittany again one day. He had convinced himself that he would get angry. But no matter how much he thought about that, he was only angry with himself. He was angry at the fact that he had acted like an idiot instead of listening to his mind. There was also a great deal of curiosity. He wanted to know who Brittany really was.

Jupiter stopped. What was all that secrecy all about? Why was he following Brittany? Why didn’t he just go up to her and talk to her?

Before he could change his mind again, the First Investigator quickly looked left and right, waited for a gap in traffic and crossed the street. With four or five quick steps, he was right behind her. He reached out his hand to her shoulder. But even before he touched her, Brittany suddenly realized that someone was behind her. She turned around.

The bewilderment in her eyes was not a disguise. For a second, Jupiter saw the real Brittany. Then she controlled herself again and shouted: “Jupiter! What a surprise!”

“Hello, Brittany.”

“What are you doing here? What a coincidence! I—”

“Save it, Brittany,” Jupiter interrupted her. “I’m not here by chance. I’m here about you.”

“About... me?” Brittany swallowed. Her light blue eyes flickered.

“Yes. Because... because...” Jupiter felt like he had suddenly stepped out of his own body and could observe himself—how he stood there and not knowing why he had crossed the street.

“I...” And suddenly, it was there again—anger at himself.

“Damn it, Brittany!” he said louder than he wanted to. “Did you think we wouldn’t find out about you? Your little arrangement with Miller, the Jaccard letters... How long were you going to keep up this game? Did you really think you could fool us forever? I thought you were smarter than that.”

Brittany stared at him wordlessly for seconds. Jupiter was unable to interpret her gaze.

“It worked out pretty well last time,” she finally said without a hint of spitefulness or gloating. The sobriety of her statement was all the more painful. But even before Jupiter could come up with a suitable answer, he suddenly heard footsteps behind him which came closer in a hurry. Bob and Pete appeared at his side. They stared at Brittany.

“What an interesting gathering this is,” Pete asked, without taking his eyes off Brittany.

“I followed a spontaneous impulse and decided to give up the secrecy,” Jupiter explained soberly without looking at Pete.

“Uh-huh,” Pete muttered.

“So?” Bob asked. “Has she revealed yet?”

“No. We were still at the hello stage.”

“Uh-huh,” Pete muttered again.

“So, Brittany,” continued Jupiter, much more relaxed now that his friends were with him. “No more games. We want to know what all this means—Miller, the letters, the explosion...”

Brittany sighed heavily and looked from one to the other. Then she nodded. “All right. Where shall I start?”

“At least not here on the street,” Jupiter said, looking around. Then he walked purposefully down Hollywood Boulevard. “Come along!”

12. Brittany's Story

Fifteen minutes later, they were sitting in a shabby diner a little off the tourist route, drinking bad, lukewarm coffee in the back corner. Apart from them, there were only two lost figures sitting at the bar, staring silently into their glasses. Outside, it had started to rain. The drops ran down the dirty windows and blurred the view of the street.

Brittany had taken off her cap and now looked almost the same as before. But Jupiter still couldn't get rid of the impression that a complete stranger was sitting opposite him.

Brittany looked around perplexed. "Where shall I start?" she repeated.

Pete laughed bitterly. "You don't know where to start? I have a great idea for a really great start, Brittany. How about you tell us what is with that skater guy Miller? And the anonymous letter? No, wait, before you answer that, I have a better idea. Why don't you tell us why you lied and cheated us back then?"

Jupiter raised his hands reassuringly. "Please, Pete. You could do it a little quieter and with less agitation."

"No, it's okay, Jupiter," Brittany said. "He's right. You're all right. I owe you an explanation. I mean... I betrayed you—"

"Indeed," Pete remarked. "Very well indeed."

"I couldn't have put it better myself," Brittany said. "But I swear to you, I had no idea what I was doing."

"Who can really believe that," Pete smirked.

"Pete! Please..." Jupiter reprimanded the Second Investigator. "Your remarks are highly counter-productive!"

Pete started to defend himself, but then remained doggedly silent.

"All right," Brittany spoke up again. "Before I tell you about Miller, the Jaccard letters and the explosion, I'll tell you the rest of my story. Maybe then you'll understand better why I did what I did." She paused for a while.

"None of what I told you about me back then, Jupiter, is the truth. I no longer go to school or live with my parents. I'm really an actress." She laughed bitterly. "At least I would like to be—like all people around Hollywood, right? I'm actually from Nevada, in the province. But what's there to do there except milk cows or work at McDonald's? As soon as I was old enough, I packed my bags and moved to Los Angeles, with the dream of the great wide world of entertainment in my head and a hundred dollars in my pocket."

"When you were old enough?" Jupiter repeated. "How old are you in reality, if I may ask?"

"Four years older than I claimed then," she replied.

Jupe swallowed and tried to change the subject quickly. "And what became of your Hollywood plans?"

Brittany continued: "What do you think? Nothing, of course. And the hundred dollars was gone in a flash. So instead, I worked at McDonald's in Los Angeles. I joined an unsuccessful theatre group, attended a few acting workshops and waited every day for a rich producer to finally discover me and make me a star. The producer never came, of course..."

“Instead one day, I met a man, a distinguished Frenchman, who offered me a job. It had nothing to do with the movies, but the job sounded interesting... and it was better than flipping burgers and filling Cokes. The assignment was to go to Rocky Beach and contact Jupiter Jones. Throw yourself at him and wrap him around your finger. Say you have a serious illness and... well... you know the rest.”

Brittany took a break. She had told her story in calm words—without pride, but also without much bitterness.

Bob and Pete didn’t know what to say. They looked over to Jupiter. But the First Investigator didn’t let on. He nodded at Brittany. “Go on.”

“After I accepted the job, I never saw Hugenay again. Instead, he called me. I kept him up to date with the situation, and he told me how to proceed. But you must believe me, I had no idea what was really behind it.”

“You had no idea?” Jupiter repeated, saying loud for the first time. “If I remember correctly, I told you then the whole story about Hugenay—that he was a criminal who had fooled us several times before... that he stole valuable paintings all over the world.”

“I know. But Hugenay... well, he put it differently. He told me that you are... not to be taken seriously. The same goes with your two friends. You are... um... how did he put it? He said you’re young people who play detective with a lot of imagination.”

“And you believed him,” Pete growled.

“Let’s just say that he paid me enough so I don’t question what he said,” Brittany replied.

Pete slapped the tabletop so hard that everyone flinched in shock and the diner’s waitress gave him an angry look.

“Paid you enough?” Pete hissed. “Paid you enough? Did you care about anything else? Or was it just about dusting off a new car and a fur coat when you gave us away? And how much do we have to pay you to make you believe us instead?”

Brittany laughed cheerlessly. “Keep it up, Pete Crenshaw. Making me out to be a money-grabbing bitch is pretty easy, isn’t it? You’re so self-righteous in your wholesome detective world, where the good guys are always good and the bad guys are always bad! No wonder. You all live at home, go to school and you’re all going to get great jobs because you’re so smart. But believe me, life doesn’t always follow a plan that you just have to tinker with long enough for it to work. You may not know it, Pete, but sometimes the calculations just doesn’t work out. Sometimes things go down the drain without you doing anything wrong. And then you’re out on the streets without a cent in your pocket...”

“A new car and a fur coat? It would have been nice! I owed the rent for a dirty little mini-apartment for three months and was almost evicted. My phone had been disconnected, my fridge is usually empty and I walk all the way downtown to work every day because I couldn’t even afford a bus ticket. The money I made frying slices of ground beef was just enough to keep me from starving. I desperately needed a better job and at that point, I would have done anything for money!”

“I believe you immediately,” Pete growled, but was less angry.

“You still don’t get it, do you? It was about survival for me. I don’t think you know what that means. I had little choice. And it seemed like a better alternative to lead a complete stranger on, than to attack and rob old grannies. Do you understand that, Pete? The noble goals, the heroism, the morals and the fight for justice that you’ve dedicated yourselves to... but how could you understand that? The sun shines every day in your lovely little Rocky Beach.”

“Anything else?” Pete asked sarcastically.

Everyone flinched as the gum-chewing waitress came to their table with a coffee pot in one hand and a notepad in the other.

"More coffee, please," Jupiter said in a husky voice and pointed to all four cups. The waitress poured more coffee and went off.

Brittany took a deep breath, took a sip and silently looked into her cup. Without looking up, she continued: "I now know that I made a mistake. But I didn't know it then. At that time, it was an interesting game for which I got enough money to pay for my apartment and keep myself afloat for a few months. I didn't worry about it... until I read the newspaper article by Wilbur Graham. It wasn't written very benevolently, but at least it contained so many facts that I realized that you had been telling the truth all along... that I was working for a master thief who was wanted all over the world... that I had made myself liable to prosecution... I lied to you, and I'm sorry."

Again silence spread around the table. Pete and Bob were torn. Until a few minutes ago, they had thought they had a clear opinion of Brittany. But that opinion had begun to waver faster than expected. What Jupiter was thinking could not even be guessed.

Finally Bob said: "Okay. Now we know the story from back then. But what about now? What about the explosion? What is with the letters, and Miller, and Hugenay? You're back in contact with him again! We overheard you yesterday."

Brittany nodded. "Yes, I'm in contact with him. A week ago, he suddenly called me and asked me if I wanted to work for him again. He had a new plan. And I said yes."

Pete wanted to explode again, but Brittany wasn't finished yet. "Hugenay only had a few small tasks for me so far—picking up packages from the post office; meeting some people and giving them the packages—that sort of thing. He never told me exactly what it was about, and I never even got to see him. Everything was done over the phone. I find the payment for my errands in envelopes. I don't know where Hugenay is or what exactly he's planning. All I know is that it is very important to him... and he's in California. That is why I wrote you the anonymous letter."

"I'm afraid I still don't quite understand, Brittany," Jupiter said.

"Is it so hard to understand? I didn't take Hugenay's assignments this time to make money. I took them to stop him! To make up for the mistakes I made."

Pete shook his head with a frown. "Through anonymous letters?"

"No," said Brittany gruffly. "Of course not. I knew I would not be able to convict Hugenay on my own. I needed help. People who know what it's all about... people who know Hugenay... people who have experience in fighting crime. In one word—you."

"Why us?" Jupiter asked. "Why not the police?"

"The police have been looking for Hugenay for years in vain. You three, on the other hand, have almost managed to get him convicted a few times. You have skills that the police don't have. But I did not know how to approach you. I was afraid you wouldn't believe me if I just showed up and told you the whole story. I was afraid you'd throw me out from your salvage yard. You have enough reasons to do so. So I've been thinking and I thought I could give you anonymous tips to get you to investigate."

"You knew it was about Jaccard's legacy," Jupiter surmised.

"Yes, Hugenay once spoke of that."

"And you knew about the power outage," continued Jupiter.

Brittany nodded. "I got this information from Hugenay's accomplices, whom I meet now and then."

"So you took this two pieces of information and sent us the anonymous letter so we could get to Santa Monica Pier and read the Jaccard letters."

“Exactly. My mission was to receive the envelope from Hugenay’s accomplices and deposit it in a secret hiding place in Santa Monica. I calculated that I would have about fifteen minutes in which to examine the letters... or rather, you. My hope was that, as detectives, you might be able to do more with it than I did. I called Miller, who still owed me a favour, and asked him to put the envelope I had just picked up myself into your hand and to take it back fifteen minutes later so that I could take it to the hiding place in time.”

Pete sighed. “And all this confusion just so you wouldn’t have to appear yourself.”

Brittany nodded. “But now, to be honest, I’m really glad that you guys got to me so quickly. The stint at Santa Monica Pier was stupid and risky. Hugenay could have noticed something. And besides, it wasn’t a good idea to sneak around anyway. After all, I wanted to take a new path, one that was open and honest from the start. And that was not.”

Brittany gazed uncertainly from one to the other. No one said anything.

“So?” she finally asked timidly. “What do you think?”

13. Subservience to Authority

Brittany's question remained unanswered until The Three Investigators sat in the stuffy darkness of Headquarters an hour later, where they were unobserved and unheard. Jupiter had broken off the meeting at the diner and made it clear that The Three Investigators needed a day to think before deciding on their further course of action. Now he looked gloomily from Bob to Pete and back again to Bob.

"She's lying," Jupe said.

"What?" Pete asked. "You really think so?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because she never intended to take an open and honest path, as she likes to express herself. Had that really been her goal, she would have come to us instead of sending us anonymous letters. She was not relieved that we had found out about her. She was terrified, and she was barely able to hide it."

"Do you really think so?" Pete followed up. "I didn't believe her at first either... but after a while—"

"—She had you wrapped around her finger," Jupiter concluded. "That did not escape me this time. She's very good at that... but with me, she can't do it twice. It's impossible."

"You don't believe her," Bob said. "But you don't have any proof that she's lying, do you?"

"No," Jupiter admitted. "But I will get them."

"So what does that mean for our case?" Bob asked.

"It means that we absolutely have to stay on top of it so we don't depend on the information Brittany gives us."

"What do you suggest?" Bob wanted to know.

Before Jupiter could answer, he was distracted by a loud roar coming from outside. "What's going on there?"

The Three Investigators out the small window. There was a huge dark green dump truck standing crosswise on the road trying to manoeuvre through the gate into the salvage yard. It was loaded with mountains of scrap metal and junk.

"Whoa! What's that, Jupe!" Pete remarked in amazement. He had never seen such a big truck before. "Is this something your uncle Titus bought? If so, he really overdid it this time. It's just junk! Where's he going to do with it? Your aunt is going to flip out!"

Jupiter frowned. "I can hardly imagine that Uncle Titus buys so much junk. The truck might just be using the driveway to make a turn."

"It doesn't look like it," Bob muttered as the driver finally managed to manoeuvre his dump truck monster through the gate in reverse.

"Come on, fellas, let's take a closer look." Jupiter jumped up and left Headquarters. Bob and Pete followed him. That's when Uncle Titus came running out towards the truck, waving his arms. "Stop! Stop the truck! Stop!"

For a moment, it looked as if the driver was simply mowing over Uncle Titus in reverse, but then he stepped on the brakes and the dump truck came to a stop.

“What are you doing?” Uncle Titus shouted at the driver.

“What does it look like?” the man behind the wheel yapped back and chewed on an extinguished cigar butt. “I’m delivering this stuff.”

“This must be a misunderstanding,” Uncle Titus said decidedly. “This is not a junkyard.”

“Oh no?” Doubtfully, he looked in the rear-view mirror. “It sure looks like it.”

In the meantime, The Three Investigators had come closer and had joined Uncle Titus.

“Listen, my good man,” Uncle Titus said, trying to be objective. “You must have got the address wrong. This junk doesn’t belong here. Please leave our premises now!”

“My boss says I should dump this stuff here... so I’m gonna dump this stuff here.”

“Absolutely not! Who’s your boss?”

“Mr Barker—from Barker Scrap Metal.”

When the name Barker was mentioned, Jupiter thought he saw his uncle flinching slightly.

“I have never heard of this company,” Titus Jones claimed. “This is a misunderstanding. Please leave.”

The driver rolled his eyes. “But my boss assigned me to deliver this.”

“Listen, sir,” Jupiter now joined the conversation. “My uncle’s statement is clear. You should verify your superior’s order before you act. Otherwise your rash subservience to authority could get not only us into trouble but also you.”

For a moment, the driver of the truck had his mouth open, the cigar butt stuck to his lower lip. “What did the boy say?”

“That you should ask your boss again,” Uncle Titus interpreted and added quietly mumbling. “I think.”

The driver sighed. “Whatever you say, mister. But don’t let it be said that I didn’t deliver on time.”

“Absolutely not,” Uncle Titus assured him.

The man shifted into first gear and the dump truck roared, slowly rolling off the yard and back onto the road, where it picked up speed and finally disappeared.

Unnoticed by Uncle Titus and The Three Investigators, Aunt Mathilda had approached from behind. She gave her husband a suspicious look. “What was that?”

“Nothing. Just a misunderstanding. This man thought we were a junkyard... Hah, absurd, right?” Titus Jones turned on his heel and went back to the office. Aunt Mathilda gave The Three Investigators another questioning look, which they could only answer with a shrug of their shoulders. Then she too went back to the office and The Three Investigators headed towards their trailer.

“Strange,” mumbled Jupiter. “But back to the subject at hand. We should—”

“Wait!” Pete said. “Before you present your plan, we have something to tell you. I’d forgotten all about it, but that truck brought me back to it... Bob and I were chasing that Mexican.”

“Right. What came out of it?”

“We followed him to his car. It was a black ’58 Corvette.”

“Rubbish-George’s warning,” mumbled Jupiter. “Night Shadow. So he’s the accomplice Brittany was talking about.”

“Exactly.”

The First Investigator thought for a while. “We should take the warning seriously and be careful. But on the other hand, it’s Victor Hugenay and Brittany! We still have a score to settle with both of them. Exercising due caution, I won’t miss the opportunity to settle that score once and for all.” Jupiter looked from one to the other with wild determination.

“So what’s your plan?” Bob asked.

“We’re going to work with Brittany.”

“Excuse me?” cried Pete. “I didn’t think you trust her!”

“I don’t. But I’m not gonna let her know. And that’s the trick.” Jupiter smiled and walked back into Headquarters.

14. Purely Business

Jupiter got a more than a strange feeling when Brittany entered Headquarters the next afternoon. She had left her sunglasses and baseball cap at home. And she was wearing the same T-shirt as when he first met her at the salvage yard. Coincidence? Brittany herself certainly didn't seem to be aware of it. She stopped at the open door and looked from one to the other. "Hi."

"Hi," Pete growled and remained seated in the armchair with folded arms. They had decided that he should continue to play the role of the sceptic towards Brittany so that she would not become suspicious.

"Hello, Brittany," Jupiter said. He didn't want to overdo it with the friendliness either.

Brittany cleared her throat. "May I sit down, or have you decided to kick me out?"

"Sit down," Bob said and offered her a seat. "And right off the bat, we're not going to tell you to get out."

"No? Then what? What did your war council come up with?"

"We believe you that you mean it honestly this time... that you want to convict Hugenay," replied Jupiter. "With this in mind, we have a common goal. And you need our help as much as we need yours. We have decided not to waste time. We need all the information you have, and then we will work out a plan together."

"That sounds reasonable," Brittany said and relaxed a bit. "So you're not mad at me anymore?"

"One has nothing to do with the other," Jupiter said. "The level on which we are operating from now on is purely business. Agreed?"

Brittany looked around. "Agreed."

"Then we'd best start with our unanswered questions, one by one..." Jupe began. "In your anonymous letter, you told us that the power outage was not an accident. Why didn't you mention the explosion right away? It would certainly have caught our attention even more."

"I didn't know there was going to be an explosion," Brittany explained. "Hugenay's accomplice just hinted at a power outage that was about to happen. He didn't say where and how. But Hugenay was incredibly upset the next day. He said that when he told the man to turn off the power, he didn't mean for it to go halfway across town."

"Interesting," Jupiter mumbled, pinching his lower lip. "So the explosion of the administration building was not planned by Hugenay. He just wanted to cut off the electricity. But what for?"

"That I don't know," Brittany replied.

"Wait a minute," Bob said. "Are you saying that this whole time it wasn't about the administration building at all? It was about that electrical substation that was damaged in the explosion that caused the power to go out?"

"Looks like it," said Jupiter. "A brilliant trick. If someone had sabotaged the substation, the police would have looked for a motive immediately. But this way, they are looking for a motive to blow up the administration building and of course they won't find one, because there is none. The power outage becomes a minor matter."

“Okay, so Hugenay needed a power outage on Friday night,” Pete said. “But what for?”

“As I said before, I don’t know,” Brittany repeated.

“Fine, next point,” Jupiter continued. “Is that accomplice responsible for the explosion the man you met yesterday at the Chinese Theatre?”

“Yes. It was from him I also received the envelope with the Jaccard letters. Yesterday at the Chinese Theatre, I gave him the payment for these two jobs—the theft of the letters and the power outage.”

Pete looked shocked at Jupiter. “Then our assumption is correct. Night Shadow is Hugenay’s accomplice!”

“You know that man?” Brittany asked in surprise.

“We were warned about him,” explained Jupiter. “He seems to be a dangerous man.”

Brittany nodded. “That’s the impression I got. He is so dangerous that even Hugenay is afraid of him.”

“Excuse me?” Bob asked, surprised. “Hugenay is afraid of him?”

“Of course Hugenay never said it like that, but I have the strong impression that he does not want to get too close to that man. Night Shadow is good at what he does. That is why Hugenay needs him. But why does Hugenay need me?” She looked around and answered her question herself. “He does not want to meet this man. Everything is done by telephone. And if anything needs to be exchanged—money or stolen letters or anything else—it always goes through me. Hugenay makes sure that it is not so easy to follow his trail. The Jaccard letters, for example, I had to put in a secret hiding place. What happened to them afterwards, I don’t know. Hugenay is very careful not to let anyone know his whereabouts. And I think it’s not only the police that he’s careful about, but also Night Shadow.”

Jupiter had the information bagged. Thoughtfully, he looked out the window while pinching his lower lip. Outside, dark cloud towers had gathered again. This time it didn’t just look like rain, but like a real storm that was about to gather its strength before it hit Rocky Beach.

The First Investigator turned back to Brittany. “What do you know about Hugenay’s plans?”

“Not much. He’s concerned about Jaccard’s legacy. I’m not sure what that is... Money, maybe, or a valuable painting.”

“A painting,” Pete said. “It’s called *Fire Moon*. That much we’ve already figured out.”

Jupiter gave the Second Investigator a stern look. Only now did Pete realize that he might have been better off keeping this information away from Brittany—but it was too late now. He cleared his throat embarrassed. “But that’s all we know.”

“Well, unfortunately, I don’t know anything more,” Brittany said. “I have no idea where this legacy is or how Hugenay is going to get it, or when.”

“It makes things complicated,” said Bob. “If we don’t know Hugenay’s next move, how are we gonna stop him?”

“Maybe we are thinking in the wrong direction all this time,” Jupiter replied and an enthusiastic glow entered his eyes.

“Oh, no,” Pete said. “I know that look. You have an idea, right, Jupe? A completely insane, hair-raisingly dangerous and absurd idea. Admit it!”

“I have a brilliant, but absolutely simple idea,” Jupiter corrected. “We should no longer try to unravel Hugenay’s web of plans and orders to get behind his secret. He is a master of planning. And on this point, we probably cannot keep up with him, especially when we have to assume that the crucial information will remain hidden from us. No, we must take a much more straightforward approach. No games, no tricks.”

“That’s beautifully put, but what exactly do you have in mind?” Bob asked.

“Let’s just get him!” Jupiter burst out.

Pete laughed. “Great, Juve! That’s really a great idea! Why didn’t we think of it before? And why haven’t the countless commissioners, detectives and other crime-fighters who have been on his trail before us done so?”

“Because now we have a decisive advantage,” Jupiter said.

“Which is?” Pete wondered.

“Brittany. We’ll get Hugenay the same way we got you. Using a simple, homemade, but always effective tracking transmitter.” Juve got up and walked up and down in the cramped headquarters.

“It’s as ingenious as it is simple! The next time you have to get something from A to B, an envelope, a parcel, money, whatever, you’ll just tag the object with one of our tracking transmitters. Of course, only if you know that it is intended for Hugenay personally and that sooner or later, it will end up with him.

“We can follow the transmitter through the whole city, if necessary through the whole of California, if we have to, and if we are prepared accordingly. When it finally reaches its destination, we call Inspector Cotta, who sends a hundred people in—and that’s it with Victor Hugenay. We’ll catch him before he commits another crime.

“Remember, he is now a wanted criminal in California too. We don’t need any more evidence against him or anything else. All we have to do is to find him and have him arrested. End of story.” Jupiter looked around enthusiastically. “What do you think?”

“I don’t know, Juve,” Bob said. “It almost sounds too simple. On the other hand, I can’t think of any reason why it shouldn’t work right now. Straightforwardness is definitely the right word for this plan.”

“What do you think, Pete?” Juve asked.

“Hmm,” mumbled the Second Investigator. He couldn’t think of a counter-argument. “And what about *Fire Moon*?”

“We can deal with that in peace when we get rid of our adversary.”

“But...” Pete started to say.

“But what?” Jupiter followed up when Pete didn’t continue.

“But to secretly track down Hugenay and have him arrested is not very fair, is it?” Pete argued.

Jupiter looked at the Second Investigator, stunned. “Fair?” he repeated quietly and took a step towards Pete. “You talk about fairness, Pete? Was it fair of Hugenay to lead us on like that the last time? ... To fake his death? ... To almost get us to steal a bunch of valuable paintings for him? Was it fair to hire Brittany to let me astray?”

Pete did not answer. No one answered. The last word seemed like an expanding soap bubble that just wouldn’t burst to fill the trailer. Jupiter fixed his eyes on the Second Investigator so as not to have to look in another direction.

“No,” Pete finally said softly. “That wasn’t fair. You’re right, Juve. But at least Hugenay has given us a chance every time so far. We always had a chance to expose his games. We would not be giving him a chance with your plan.”

“Right,” Jupiter said coldly. “And that is why the plan will work. We won’t give Hugenay a chance. There will be no game this time. And shall I tell you why? Because from the beginning it was all his rules, not ours. He’s got this obsession to challenge us again and again. He kept taking advantage of the situation and creating scenarios where we could match our strength against his... but mostly without us even knowing it. It was his game with his rules right from the start. We were never asked to play along, and that’s why he always won.

But this time, it will be different. This time, the game will end before it even starts. This time... we make the rules. And the rules are—there are no rules, and there is no game. Hugenay goes to prison, period. Fast, efficient, no frills.”

Pete swallowed. “Okay.”

Suddenly, Brittany’s phone rang. “Excuse me,” she muttered, absent-mindedly grabbing the phone and taking the call.

“Yes?” A second later, she turned pale. “Monsieur Hugenay!”

15. A Great Opportunity

The Three Investigators looked at Brittany in horror. Pete gasped for breath before he put his hands over his mouth.

Brittany, probably too irritated by the three tense faces, turned around and looked to the wall as she spoke.

"No, no, everything is fine, Monsieur Hugenay. I'm just with old friends from drama school... Yes. Yes, I understand... When? ... Tomorrow night? Of course, that is no problem... Wait, I'll write it down." She turned, looked at Jupiter and waved her hand excitedly. The First Investigator quickly handed her a notepad and pencil. Brittany nodded gratefully and took some notes.

"Yes, all right, Monsieur Hugenay... I will be there... I beg your pardon? ... Of course, I'll be careful. You can rely on me, no one will notice anything... Yes. Thank you. Goodbye." Brittany turned off her mobile phone and stared at the display until the lights went out.

"That was him," she said soundlessly.

"You don't say," Pete remarked.

"Does he have a new assignment for you?" Jupiter asked.

Brittany nodded. "I'm supposed to pick up a package for him tomorrow night in Los Angeles. Again, the man you call Night Shadow will give it to me. Afterwards, I'm going to take the package to a taxi, and that's the end of my mission."

"A taxi?" Bob wondered.

"I think that the package will be taken from there by a taxi," said Brittany.

"And straight to Hugenay," Jupiter concluded. "Sure, a taxi driver thinks nothing of such a trip. It's quite common in this business. And the trace to Hugenay would be lost... unless —"

"—Unless we're gonna stay on the ball," Bob said and felt his heart beat faster. "Jupe, the plan can actually work, do you realize that?"

The First Investigator nodded. "If we don't mess it up. We have to play it safe. We may not get a second chance to nab Hugenay. Everything must be planned precisely."

A short while later, Brittany left and The Three Investigators remained at Headquarters to prepare for what they code-named 'Operation Master Thief'.

"Any ideas yet?" Pete asked.

Jupiter nodded slowly and thoughtfully. Then he reached for the phone.

"What are you up to?" Bob asked.

"I'll call Inspector Cotta. He must be forewarned. If we inform him only after we know Hugenay's whereabouts, he may not be able to react quickly enough."

Bob and Pete had no more opportunity to question Jupiter's decision. The First Investigator had already decided and a moment later, the Inspector was on the phone. Pete adjusted the loudspeaker so that they could listen in on the conversation.

"Good afternoon, Inspector Cotta. It's—"

“Jupiter Jones,” the inspector’s voice came out of the loudspeaker. “I could hear it ringing. Besides, it is about time again. You three haven’t presented me with anyone to arrest for at least two weeks. Who is it this time?”

Jupiter smiled. Inspector Cotta was known for his dry humour. Actually they liked each other, but they would never have admitted that publicly.

“A particularly big fish,” replied Jupiter.

“So? Who? Al Capone?”

“Close. Victor Hugenay.”

For seconds, there was silence at the other end.

“Inspector Cotta? Are you there?”

“Of course I’m still here. You’re kidding, right?”

“No. As you know, we have had several encounters with Hugenay and—”

“I know, Jupiter Jones! I know! And do you have any idea of the reputation of the Rocky Beach police? We’re the precinct that let the world’s most wanted art thief escape three times!”

“Well, if everything works out, there won’t be a fourth time, Inspector. And you will go down in the annals of crime as the man who finally succeeded in arresting Victor Hugenay.”

“Where is he?”

“Nearby. We don’t know exactly where yet, but we should know tomorrow night. We need you, Inspector—you and your people, preferably as many as possible. Wherever Victor Hugenay is staying, the area must be monitored on a large scale, so that under any circumstances, he must not—”

“—Escape. Thank you very much, Jupiter Jones, but I am no longer a patrol officer and I know very well what I have to do to catch a criminal. I’d be much obliged if you’d let me do my job. So where is he?”

“Like I said, we don’t know yet.”

“Then give me the information you have, and the police will take over.”

“This is not going to work.”

“Why not?”

“No offence, Inspector, but the measures required to locate Victor Hugenay are rather unconventional. It’s better if the three of us pursue the matter to the end and you come into play only afterwards.”

Cotta sucked in the air annoyingly. “So you expect me to trust you blindly and send a hundred policemen tomorrow to the place you tell me without me having the slightest idea how you came to that conclusion?”

“Yes. Have I ever let you down?”

“More than once, Jupiter Jones.”

“But everything always turned out okay, didn’t it?”

“By hook or by crook, and with a fair amount of luck, yes. But I don’t want to rely on luck when it comes to Victor Hugenay... not a fourth time.”

“It won’t come to that, Inspector. You and your men stand by for tomorrow night. Your area of operation is likely to be the greater Los Angeles area. I will call you as soon as we know more.”

Now Cotta finally burst out: “How dare you talk to me like that! You are not my superior, Jupiter Jones! I should...” Cotta broke off.

“Send me to bed without supper?” Jupiter suggested with a grin. “I beg you, Inspector, you must trust us! Just this one more time! This will end well! I’m sure it will!”

“How I wish I could believe that.”

“See you tomorrow night, Inspector. I will call you!” He hung up.

“That was pretty tough the way you handled him, Jupe,” Bob remarked.

“Not at all,” contradicted the First Investigator. “It is quite clear that Cotta must not treat us like fools. He would make himself liable to prosecution and on top of that lose face and get his authority challenged. So we must disregard everything he said. With the three of us acting on our own, we free him from this dilemma. He knows that too. And in roughly thirty hours, the subject will be forgotten anyway. Victor Hugenay will be taken away in handcuffs.”

That night, Jupiter did not sleep a wink. For hours, he rolled back and forth until the blanket got on his nerves so much that he kicked it to the floor. He still couldn’t sleep. His heart was beating so loudly that he almost feared that he would wake Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus. Tomorrow was constantly on his mind. Everything sounded so simple. Basically, nothing could go wrong as long as they did not lose the signal from the tracking transmitter. And they had taken precautions against that.

But it was precisely the simplicity of this plan that worried Jupiter. Victor Hugenay was not a simple man, on the contrary. He was a master of planning. Surely he wouldn’t risk being exposed in such a simple way.

On the other hand, perhaps Hugenay had considered so many possibilities that he had missed the easiest one. Perhaps he simply didn’t expect that a simple tracking transmitter, assembled from an electronic construction kit, could be his undoing. Besides, he had no idea that Brittany was a traitor... if she was one!

It was no use. No matter how Jupiter thought about it, from now on, he was powerless. The action had been carefully planned, and now The Three Investigators’ scheme would either work out or not. For once, thinking did not get him any further. As the morning dawned, he finally fell into a light, restless sleep.

There was hardly any difference for Pete and Bob. After an almost sleepless night, Bob nodded off briefly in geography class and woke up to the fact that his arm, with which he had supported his head, slipped over the edge of the table and the class collapsed with laughter.

Pete crossed the finish line in fourth place in the hundred-metre run after he had already failed in the high jump. That was more than embarrassing. His gym teacher gave him worried looks and asked him after class if everything was okay.

And Jupiter did not think it was necessary to lift his finger once that day. His mind was elsewhere. In the afternoon, The Three Investigators met at Headquarters, completely exhausted and at the same time wide awake and excited.

“What do we do if it goes wrong?” Bob asked anxiously. “Is there a Plan B we should know about, Jupe?”

The First Investigator shook his head. “It’s gonna work. It must work, okay?”

Bob was not very reassured, but kept silent.

Hour after hour passed while they waited. Bob was checking their equipment for the hundredth time when the phone finally rang. All three jumped to the phone at the same time, but Jupiter was the fastest. “The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

It was Brittany.

“Here we go!” Jupe said.

16. Operation Master Thief

Pete was driving alone in his MG, looking strained at the evening road and listening to the static noise coming from the walkie-talkie. He was turning onto a brightly-lit Wilshire Boulevard when Jupiter said: "Second, come in! This is First."

Pete grabbed the walkie-talkie that was on the passenger seat and pressed the talk button. "This is Second. What's up?"

"We are now on Sunset Boulevard. And you?"

"Wilshire."

"What's the traffic like?" Jupiter asked.

"It's good."

"We are well ahead of schedule. So don't worry."

"Who's worried? I'm relaxed!" That was a lie, of course. Pete was more excited than he had been in a long time. But why should he worry Jupiter?

Jupiter was sitting with Bob in his Beetle and they took a different route to the agreed meeting point. At all costs, they wanted to avoid a traffic jam getting in their way. Besides, Jupiter thought it was safer to travel in two cars. For that, he took a bit of time to build a second receiver for the tracking transmitter. It was bigger and clunkier and consisted largely of an open tangle of cables, but it worked. However, there was no reception yet. The transmitter they gave Brittany the day before was still too far away.

It took another ten minutes before Pete reached the university area. It was still unusually cold, and thunderclouds had been gathering thicker and thicker over the sky all day. The air was charged and the threatening thunderstorm drove people away from the streets. The area was not half as busy as usual.

Somewhere in this area was the meeting point of Brittany and Night Shadow. Pete was about to reach for the walkie-talkie when a small green light flashed on the display of the receiver. The tracker was within range. "First, come in."

"First here. What's up?"

"I have the green light on the screen."

"Okay. Operation Master Thief starts!" Jupe announced. "In any case, stay far enough away! No one must even remotely know we're near!"

"All right!"

Pete turned left and steered the car towards the signal. He was already quite close to the blinking dot. Now he had to be careful. Pete kept his eyes on the road to see if he saw Brittany anywhere. Then he looked at the display. Then he looked again at the next possible turn. And again at the display. And so he noticed much too late that the dark blue Lexus in front of him had put on the turn signal and was slowing down to turn off—but much too slow. The Second Investigator stepped on the brakes, but before even the tyres could squeal, there was a bang and Pete was thrown forward until the seat belt pulled him back.

"Damn!" cried Pete, and a thousand thoughts flashed through his head at once—Brittany! The tracking transmitter! Hugenay!

Only then did he wonder if he was hurt. Carefully he turned his head left and right and put his hands around his neck. Everything was fine. Groaning, he loosened his seat belt and

groped for the walkie-talkie. He had to inform Jupe! But at that moment, there was loud yelling in front of him.

“You idiot! Don’t you have eyes on your head? My car’s brand new!” A huge bald guy with a bright red face and wearing a suit charged towards Pete’s car. “I knew it! A kid! He’s still in diapers and he’s already wrecking people’s cars. Have you even got your driver’s licence yet?”

Pete was far too perplexed to answer. An elderly woman, loaded with shopping bags, hurried towards Pete’s car.

“Why don’t you leave the boy alone?” she yelled at the bald man. “Maybe he’s hurt.”

“I hope he’s hurt himself,” the man yelled back at an undiminished volume.

Pete slowly climbed out of the car. His legs trembled.

“Hey!” someone yelled across the street. “I saw it all! Should I call the police?”

“They’re never around when you need them!”

“Second, come in!” Jupiter’s voice squawked out of the walkie-talkie. “Come in, Second!”

“Well, no wonder! Playing around with a walkie-talkie when you should be looking at the road,” the man continued to get excited. “Hey, boy! I’m talking to you! Are you listening to me?”

“Repeat, come in, Second.”

“How do you expect the poor boy to answer if you keep yelling at him, mister?”

“Stay out of this, you old bag!”

“Now look, how dare you talk to me like that!”

“Second, what’s going on? Come in, Second!”

“Hey! Do you want me to call the police?”

“What’s with the stupid question?”

Pete took a deep breath once. Then he roared with all his might: “Shhhuttup!”

Everyone stared at him, and remained silent.

Slowly and calmly, he went on: “Just a moment, please.” He climbed back into the car and grabbed the walkie-talkie... and his eyes fell on the clunky receiver of the tracking transmitter. It had slipped off the seat and hadn’t survived the impact. The display had disconnected. Pete moaned and pressed the talk button. “This is Second. I have a problem. I just messed up Operation Master Thief.”

“This can’t be true,” said Bob, who was at the wheel, shaking his head after Pete had told them over the walkie-talkie what had happened.

“Take it easy, Bob. That’s why we’ve got two cars, just in case something goes wrong.”

“Yes. But nothing should go wrong now.”

In the meantime, they had also reached the university area. When Bob stopped at a traffic light, Jupe, who was monitoring the receiver, suddenly shouted, “I’ve got the signal!”

A minute later, they had located Brittany. Her blonde hair was shining under a street lamp. “There she is.”

“Don’t turn off when it turns green,” Jupiter advised. “Drive straight ahead. We don’t need to keep an eye on her. We’re tracking the transmitter now.”

The red phase was long. Jupiter and Bob could still observe how Brittany leaned against a mailbox, seemingly absorbed in a magazine. Jupiter took the binoculars out of the glove box and held them up to his eyes. “Black Corvette, 10 o’clock... Night Shadow approaches...

He drives towards her... and stops... They talk to each other... He gives her a package... And he drives on.”

“Green,” Bob said and crossed the intersection. Now they were again dependent on the tracking transmitter. “Now where’s the taxi?”

“I don’t know,” Jupe said. “Take a walk around the block.”

“I thought we were supposed to keep a low profile.”

“I thought so, but whatever. I’m too curious.”

Bob made a generous swerve, with the signal almost leaving the reception area, and then it returned. Jupiter held the binoculars in his hand. “There she is again! She’s standing at the intersection and is on the lookout! Stop the car! Better not to drive past her. If she sees us, she’ll be confused.”

Bob drove to the side of the road and stopped with the engine running. Nothing happened for a while. People were walking by, but nobody noticed them. Jupiter tried to reach Pete again, but the Second Investigator had switched off his walkie-talkie until the matter with the accident was cleared up. Then finally something happened on the street corner.

“Here comes a taxi!” cried Bob. “It’s heading straight for Brittany, and she wasn’t even waving at him!”

“That must be it!” Jupiter cried.

The two detectives watched as Brittany opened the passenger door of the taxi, spoke briefly with the driver, put the package in the car and closed the door. The taxi moved back into the traffic while Brittany watched.

“She did it!” said Jupiter, and his eyes was now fixed on the display. “The transmitter is moving away! Drive off, Bob! But slowly.”

“All right, chief.”

They followed the taxi at a reasonable distance. Soon it disappeared among the mass of other taxis on the street and Bob and Jupiter wondered more than once which of the taxis it was. But luckily, the receiver worked perfectly and they didn’t have to worry about losing the transmitter.

The drive led them slowly back towards Rocky Beach, along the busy Sunset Boulevard with its colourful neon signs and noble hotels and apartment buildings. During the first few kilometres, they kept their distance to the taxi. But little by little, Jupiter noticed that the blinking dot moved further and further towards the edge of the display.

“Go faster, Bob, else we’re gonna lose him.”

Bob was just about to go faster when the traffic light jumped to red right in front of him. He braked. “Damn!”

The taxi had apparently not been stopped by a traffic light. On the display, the signal point continued its way. And the traffic light did not and would not change to green. In the end it did—at exactly the second when a huge truck and an equally huge tourist bus got in each other’s way in the middle of the intersection and blocked each other.

“Man, you gotta be kidding me!” Bob moaned and pressed the horn angrily.

“Now drive!” cried Jupiter from the open window. More and more cars honked and pushed towards the intersection, which only made the situation worse. Neither the bus nor the truck had the chance to back up to make room. After a few moments, the entire intersection was hopelessly clogged up. A motorcyclist was already meandering across the pavement past the traffic jam.

“Those idiots!” Jupiter kept cursing. “Bob, do something!”

“What am I supposed to do? I can’t do anything!”

Jupiter looked at the display and saw the dot flashing on the edge one last time. A while later, it was gone. "The signal! It's out of range!" Jupiter leaned out of the window and shouted with all his might: "You would be doing humanity a great service if you would decide on another profession as soon as possible, you... you... traffic obstacle! You are a threat to public order! You insult every other driver! Most of all, you insult me!"

"Jupe," Bob said and put his hand on his friend's arm to calm him down. "That won't do much good."

"I don't care," growled Jupiter.

It took three minutes before the cars blocking the way finally moved back and allowed the bus to clear the road far enough for the truck to continue. Once the road was clear, Bob accelerated. For a few minutes, he drove in dogged silence, his eyes alternately fixed on the speedometer and on the road.

Jupiter stared at the display. But the signal remained missing. The taxi had a four-minute lead. Then there was another disturbing thought that no one wanted to say at first.

Finally, Bob had to say it: "What do we do if the taxi turned off? What do we do if—"

"Bob," Jupiter interrupted him abruptly. "I have no idea, okay? Just keep driving!"

Bob drove until they reached Pacific Palisades. With each kilometre they travelled, it became clearer and clearer that they had lost the taxi. The signal might never reappear.

"First, come in! This is Second."

Jupiter had already forgotten all about the walkie-talkie. "This is First. How's it going?"

"Don't ask. It's a disaster. The car is still running, but it looks pretty bad. At least I finally got away from that idiot. Where are you? Where do you want me to go?"

"Home," Jupiter answered in a grave voice. "Operation Master Thief is over."

17. Back on the Trail

Half an hour later, when Pete entered Headquarters, the mood among the three had reached its lowest point. In his hand was the damaged clunky receiver.

Bob stared silently out of the window and watched the rain coming down, which was getting heavier and heavier. Jupiter looked down at the ground between his feet.

“Jupe,” Pete began softly, “I’m really sorry. I should have been more careful. But that stupid guy in front of me... he was flashing his turn signal way too late. And then—”

The First Investigator waved away. “It’s okay, Pete. I know you didn’t wreck your car on purpose. It’s just...” He got up and started walking up and down the trailer. “I could go mad! We’ve thought of everything! We’ve taken every possible precaution! And yet—”

“—They were two really dumb coincidences,” Bob interrupted and tried to calm him down. “There’s nothing you can do. These things happen.”

“But not today! If it weren’t completely impossible, I would almost suspect that Hugenay had a hand in that as well. It is bewitching. This may have been our last chance to catch him.”

“Perhaps we should call Cotta and let him know that the operation is over,” Pete said timidly.

“And Brittany,” Bob added. “She’s probably eager to know how it went.”

Jupiter sighed. “I can’t do this now. I am far too frustrated to admit our defeat to Cotta. It’s just... too much.”

“You know what?” Pete stepped forward and tried an encouraging smile. “How about we go out for a bite to eat after this scare? Let Cotta and Brittany wait. I’m sure their frustration is not as great as ours. And I know that a few fatty fast food portions will at least put our leader in a good mood.”

Jupiter couldn’t help it—he had to smile. And his mouth was watering. “This is surely the best idea of the evening,” he said and got up.

Pete’s car was a mess. The bonnet had a huge crease, the glass of the right headlight was broken and the fender was wrecked.

“Don’t look,” Pete murmured and got in. “Can we go in Bob’s Beetle?”

They headed for a new hamburger restaurant on the western outskirts of town. Jupiter, who was sitting in the passenger seat, brought along the damaged clunky receiver.

“Why did you bring this thing out,” Bob asked.

“I just want to check whether I could get it fixed,” Jupe said. “It’ll take my mind of this case for a while.”

Jupe took a closer look at the receiver and fiddled with it. It was not as badly damaged as he had feared. In fact, only one cable was disconnected from the solder joint. Jupiter held it to the contact for a test—and almost dropped the whole device in shock.

Small, green and blinking, a dot had appeared on the display.

“The signal!” breathed Jupiter.

“What kind of signal?” Bob asked disinterestedly.

“The signal! It’s back!” Trying to show the others, the loose cable slipped from the solder joint. The display went out immediately. With shaking fingers, Jupiter re-established contact by firmly pressing the cable end on the joint. The signal appeared again!

“We are back on the trail! Go, Bob! Get after him! Take the next left, then straight on towards the sea and then right again! But be careful, if you please.”

“Are you kidding?” Bob accelerated and chased through the almost deserted Rocky Beach at this hour.

It wasn’t until he reached the coast road that it got a little crowded.

“The signal doesn’t seem to move at all,” Jupiter noted excitedly. “We are approaching incredibly fast. It must be here on the coast somewhere!”

“Shall we let Cotta know?” Pete asked.

“Better not yet. It’s possible that the transmitter was discovered and thrown out the window. We have to be sure first.”

Here, between Rocky Beach and Malibu, the coastal strip was hardly populated. Only a few isolated houses stood at the roadside or inland on the mountain slopes. The signal came closer and closer until it finally lay just left of them towards the sea. But they couldn’t see anything there—no house, no car, nothing. Bob drove a little further.

“Turn back, Bob! We’re too far away! The transmitter must be back there somewhere, no doubt about it!”

Bob turned at the next opportunity and finally parked at the side of the street. They got out. A storm wind welcomed them. In front of them lay a few metres of undergrowth before the land sloped steeply down to the beach.

“He must be on the beach,” whispered Pete. “Or even out at sea.”

Jupe shook his head. “The signal is already too close to be out at sea.” He climbed over the guard rail and crept through the dense undergrowth until he was standing next to the slope.

Then Jupiter saw something. There was a house beneath—a little wooden beach house. The salt wind from the ocean had badly damaged the once white paint. Jupiter was aware of that house. It belonged to someone from Los Angeles, who rented it out most of the year.

The First Investigator looked at the receiver. There was no longer any doubt—the transmitter was inside that house! Since it had been built halfway up the cliff, there were only two ways to reach it—from the beach, up a narrow path, and from the road, down a wooden staircase of about thirty metres.

“There’s light behind the windows,” Bob whispered. “Jupe, do you really think that Hugenay is down there?”

“We should definitely find out before we call Cotta,” Jupiter replied.

“Do you really think so?” Pete asked in horror. “But he might see us and escape again.”

“We need proof first. Otherwise Cotta will tear our heads off,” Jupe insisted.

Lightning flashed across the night sky and the wind blew a cloud of sand from the beach up to them.

“So what do you suggest?” Bob asked.

“The staircase leading down to the house is completely dark. If I’m careful, the person in that house won’t notice me, whoever it is. If I see Hugenay, I’ll give you a sign and you call Cotta! All right?”

Before Bob or Pete could object, Jupiter was already on his way. Crouching, he crept along the edge of the precipice to the stairs. After a few steps, he had left the light of the street behind him and groped his way through the darkness. Only the faint lighting behind the windows showed him the way. The wooden steps creaked under his feet. The railing wobbled alarmingly. The wind blew strongly, and the whirled-up fine sand from the beach stung his face.

When Jupiter reached the end of the stairs, the rain had calmed down to a drizzle. He approached the window with a beating heart and peered carefully through the glass. It was dirty and greasy and at first glance, Jupiter didn't see anything.

Then he saw him—a tall man in a white summer suit and with strictly combed-back black hair stood in a small kitchenette and stirred something in a pot. As he briefly turned his head while reaching for a salt shaker, Jupiter could see his face.

It was him—Victor Hugenay.

At that moment, a lightning bolt flashed through the night and dispelled the protective darkness. Jupiter crouched. Had Hugenay seen him?

The First Investigator didn't want to take any chances. Instead of taking another look through the window, he stayed crouched and crept a few steps backwards. Then he turned around, lay crouched in the dense undergrowth and carefully stuck his head out to look for Bob and Pete. It took a moment for him to see his two friends in the darkness. He stuck his thumb up in the air. Pete waved back wildly. He had understood the signal.

Jupiter's heart beat vigorously as he returned to the lighted window. Victor Hugenay was indeed here! And in a few minutes, the most wanted art thief in the world would be arrested. In just a few minutes...

Thunder rumbles made the air tremble as Jupiter peered through the window again. Hugenay was no longer standing at the stove. And he didn't see him anywhere else. Where had he disappeared to? Did he notice him after all? Jupiter turned around—and jumped backwards in shock.

"It took a long time this time, Jupiter Jones!" Victor Hugenay was standing right beside him.

18. The Break Out

Jupiter was frozen. Hugenay had discovered him! Did he also know that Bob and Pete were nearby? Did he know that the police were on their way here? Either way, Jupiter had to buy time. “What do you mean, Mr Hugenay?”

“Well, I’ve been expecting your visit since I’ve been living here, in your immediate neighbourhood, so to speak. I was wondering how long it would be before we meet up again. We’ve always met when I’ve had... um... work to do around here.” Hugenay slowly looked to his left and right. He didn’t seem to bother with the rain coming down. “Are your friends there?”

Jupiter did not answer. Instead, he watched Hugenay very closely. The master thief pretended to be calm, but Jupiter was not swayed by his composure.

“They’re probably stuck in the bushes somewhere or up the road, aren’t they? Well, I’m afraid I won’t be able to say good evening to them personally. Would you please give them my regards, Jupiter? I have to go now.”

“Go?” Jupiter asked quickly. “Where are you going?”

Victor Hugenay was amused. “Believe me, I’d love to talk to you more, but I certainly won’t wait until the police arrive. We will have plenty of opportunities to talk in the future, Jupiter. I’m sure we will. I wish you all a good evening.” Hugenay winked at him and stepped past him towards the path leading to the beach.

At that moment, the steep face to the road suddenly started to slide. Sand and rubble were crashing down. A figure flew towards them. It was Pete.

The Second Investigator had courageously jumped over the embankment and was now surfing down the slope, taking rocks and plants with him. But halfway down, he suddenly stumbled over a rock. The halfway elegant slide turned into an unchecked fall. With a frightened scream, he landed belly first right in front of Hugenay’s feet.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Pete moaned, coughing and spitting out the sand he had swallowed on his descent.

Hugenay laughed. “Impressive, Pete Crenshaw! Very impressive. You’re lucky you didn’t land on me. The suit is expensive and I would have to get it dry-cleaned.”

The Second Investigator got up and positioned himself in front of the man, blocking his way to the path.

“Very funny, Mr Hugenay! But I’m serious, you’re not getting out of here. It’s over.”

Now Bob also reached there. He had taken the stairs and gave Jupiter reinforcement. Hugenay was surrounded—behind him stood Jupiter and Bob, in front of him stood Pete. On his left was the steep slope and on his right, the house.

Hugenay looked at his watch. “Very sorry, but I really am in a hurry, boys, excuse me!” Hugenay turned to his right, stepped towards the window, pushed it up and dived through it into the house. It happened so quickly and so elegantly, as if he had practised this manoeuvre a hundred times. And he probably did.

“He’s getting away,” Pete cried and was about to go after him, but at that moment, Hugenay slammed the window shut from the inside. He smiled, waved at them and disappeared.

“After him!” the Second Investigator shouted and circled the house. But Victor Hugenay had already stormed out the front door.

By the time Pete got to the front door, he saw Hugenay getting on something that could not be seen clearly in the dark. Suddenly an engine rattled and headlights flashed up and blinded the Second Investigator.

“He has a beach buggy!” Pete shouted to his friends as Hugenay accelerated and rushed towards him. Pete threw himself to the side, but that wasn’t necessary at all, because Hugenay pulled the wheel around and drove the buggy on the path down the slope to the beach. It was breakneck, but the wide tyres dug deep enough into the sand to prevent the vehicle from tipping over.

“Damn!” Jupiter gasped and ran past Pete down the path. In fact, he stumbled more than he ran. Pete and Bob followed behind.

When The Three Investigators finally reached the bottom of the slope and got to the beach, Hugenay was already fifty metres away on his roaring buggy.

Jupiter stopped exhausted. “Forget it, fellas! We’ll never catch him! At least not on foot!” A wave of disappointment and anger rolled in and caught Jupiter so unexpectedly that tears welled up in his eyes.

“Damn! He... he got away!” Pete exclaimed. “This... this can’t be happening again! That —”

“Wait a minute!” Bob cried and pointed excitedly in the direction Hugenay was going. “There are cars approaching! Many cars!”

The Three Investigators watched as eight or ten Jeeps coming through the rain. They could hardly see past the glaringly bright headlights. They drove in a formation that slowly fanned out the closer they got to the buggy. They wanted to cut him off!

Bob was the first to understand what was going on. “That’s the police!” Hugenay seemed to notice that, too, because suddenly he made a complete U-turn with the buggy, the wet sand splattered over the beach in a high arc, and raced in the other direction.

“Here come more Jeeps!” cried Pete. “Look, they’re driving towards him! ... They’re surrounding him!”

Suddenly the headlights of the buggy went out and the vehicle disappeared in the darkness. And the police Jeep formation, which had been well-ordered a while ago, turned into a complete mess within seconds.

The beach was in chaos. The Jeeps raced in confusion, sand and water splashed on, there was honking and shouting like crazy. From that distance, Jupiter, Pete and Bob could not see a thing.

“They’ve lost him,” Jupiter finally muttered in disappointment. “He probably escaped in the dark and they haven’t even noticed and are now chasing each other.”

“You don’t know that yet, Jupe,” Pete said and shook his head. “There are twenty Jeeps down there! How could Hugenay get away from them?”

“He can, Pete,” Jupiter said. “He can...”

Suddenly, the commotion became even louder. Policemen roared wildly, Jeeps slowed down and people, barely visible behind the black and white flickering wall of rain, ran frantically back and forth. Then finally one car after another came to a halt.

“Now what?” Bob wanted to know. “Something’s happened. Why are they all stopping?”

The Three Investigators were just about to rush towards the commotion when one of the Jeeps broke away and slowly drove towards them. The headlights caught them and the car finally stopped a few metres away. The driver’s door was opened and someone got out. Only after he had taken a few steps and stepped into the beam of light did they recognize the man.

“Inspector Cotta!” Jupe gasped. “What... what happened?”

The inspector looked tired. The rain was pouring out of his hair and into his eyes. He looked at the three friends one after the other and finally walked towards Jupiter. Inspector Cotta put his hand on his shoulder. A gesture that didn’t fit Cotta at all and could only mean the worst.

Jupiter swallowed.

“Come on, speak up,” Pete urged. “Is he... I mean, have you...”

“He got away, didn’t he?” Jupiter asked tonelessly.

Finally, a smile crept onto Cotta’s face. Slowly he shook his head. Then he said: “We’ve got him!”

*To be continued in
Part II: The Path of Deception.*